Campione! Volume 11

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These are novel illustrations that were included in "Campione! Volume 11".

ふたつめの物語

北欧神話

Campione XI

丈月城

Illustration シコルスキー

神殺しが紡ぐ新神話 ついに!

TVアニメ化 決定!!

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カンピオーネ! XI ふたつめの物語

丈月城

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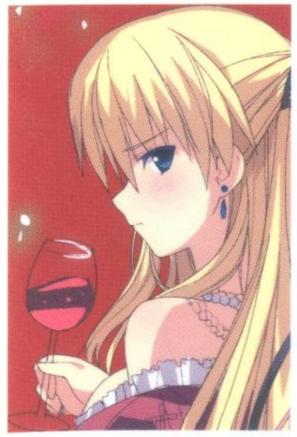
草薙護堂は神殺しとなった。



草薙護堂（くさなぎごどう）は友であった軍神・ウルスラグナと相打ちとなり、神殺しの魔王・カンピオーネへと生まれ変わった。かの神を殺す際、護堂に利用された神王・メルカルトは新たな王を次なる敵と定める。さらにはイタリアの剣の王・ドニも護堂との戦いを求めるが、それは彼の配下の魔術結社に所属するエリカの、護堂との別れを意味していた…!

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集英社

カンピオーネ!
漫画:坂本次郎 原作:丈月城
キャラクター原案:シコルスキー
SUPER DASH & GO!
(隔月刊偶数月25日発売)にて
大好評連載中!
創刊第2号は12月24日(土)発売!!
神殺しの物語は漫画でも紡がれる!

た 9-11

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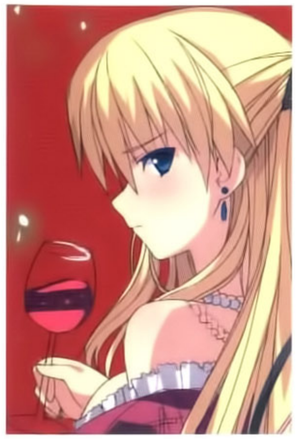

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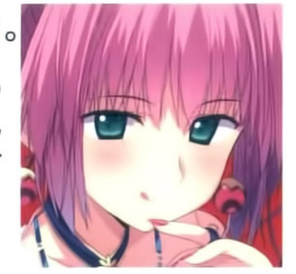

丈月 城

Illustration
シコルスキー

カンピオーネ！ Campione XI

ふたつめの物語

メルカルト

パンドラ

ルクレチア

護堂

ドニ

エリカ

「ゆ、幽霊!?　なんで幽霊さんがわたしのお部屋に!?」

突然の幽霊さんとの遭遇に、
生命を生み出す女性の体はパニック寸前。
女子のパジャマをマジマジと凝視しているのはいいけど、
幽霊さんにそんな趣味があるとは思えない。
ていうか、幽霊さんに欲情とかできるのかな？

「じゃあ、ひとつ派手に決めてみようかな！」

刃渡り八メートル弱。プラス柄の部分が一メートルほど。

その長さにふさわしく、刀身の巾も広く、がっしりした造りだった。

この剣の裏に、子供くらいなら余裕で隠れられるはずだ。

ドニの身長が一八五センチ前後。

彼のなんと四倍超のスケールだ。

まったく釣り合いの取れていない長大すぎる剣を、

銀の腕のカンピオーネは〝ひょい〟と片手で振りあげている。

すごいを通りこしてバカげていた。

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丈月 城

Illustration

シコルスキー

カピオネ！

ふたつめの物語

Campione XI

Chapter 1 - A Devil King is Born...?

Part 1

By the time he realized it, Godou already found himself imprisoned -- as for the cause, perhaps it was rather out of the blue .

Now that he thought about it, everything started four days earlier.

It was during the spring break when he was about to enter high school, Godou visited Italy's Sardinia in his grandfather's place. There, he encountered the handsome amnesiac youth, Erica the knight and mage, as well as the witch Lucretia Zola--

All individuals possessing strange and incredible powers.

Furthermore, Godou encountered "gods."

Meeting a god, conversing with a god, fighting a god, obtaining victory... Something like that.

After using the [Secret Tome of Prometheus], his consciousness had gone fuzzy and he could not recall what happened afterwards.

However, he could still vividly recall his friend, the youth standing amidst flames. His joyful smile, his sharp eyes carrying an expression of regret, and those parting words.

"Kusanagi Godou, I grant my blessing to thee who has been reborn as the new god-slaying king!"

Even on the verge of death, his voice was very clear and distinctive.

The youth's entire charisma as a "hero" was overflowing there.

"Thou art the first person to usurp mine -- the authority of the god of victory! Becomest stronger than anyone else! Until the day I shall fight thee again, possessest my undefeatable body!"

Even though I didn't quite understand, that was what he told me.

He displayed such mettle and battle spirit for a rematch, even as he lay on death's door.

Indeed that was his true nature. This Persian Warlord of old, using the ten incarnations to fight, protecting the people, worshiped as the undefeated victorious hero, only Verethragna could have fitting final moments like these.

Hence.

Kusanagi Godou's life was in peril. Then he lost consciousness.

Several hours passed.

Even though the battle against Verethragna took place around the hours of dawn, Godou took until noon to wake up. Erica immediately came to his side.

Erica told him they had left the ruins that had been used as the battlefield and come to a nearby village. Erica fortuitously found a four-room inn, gotten a room, and placed the unconscious Godou on the bed.

"Acting so reckless, and yet he's still alive... Recovering so quickly in such short time, sure enough--"

Hearing Erica mumbling on the bedside, Godou was puzzled.

Severely beaten up by Verethragna, and even struck by the decisive lightning attack. Due to using the [Secret Tome of Prometheus], both his body and brain had felt scorching hot as if on fire.

Dying then and there was only natural.

Getting up from bed and examining his body, Godou began to mutter.

"I've really recovered. I, could I be dreaming?"

Blunt trauma, broken bones, abrasions, bleeding, burns, rupturing of internal organs, high fever, etc.

Unable to find any trace of the unbearable pain, Godou only found a completely healthy body instead. Furthermore.

"...Eh."

Swinging his right arm unintentionally, he found the feeling slightly strange. Godou had injured his right shoulder last summer , forcing him to quit the sport of baseball to which he had devoted himself for many years.

"Strange..."

Moving his right shoulder back and forth, he could not feel anything unusual. It moved very smoothly.

In addition, he noticed something else.

He was extremely hungry.

His stomach was growling and rumbling, causing a commotion, demanding food and nutrients.

"Hey Erica, you got anything to eat?"

"If there are restaurants nearby, I can order takeout. But Godou, weren't you on the verge of death? In my opinion, you shouldn't eat anything that could strain your stomach."

This was most sensible advice, but Godou declared loudly.

"No problem! I currently feel like I could even digest my own shoes! Bring it on!"

Thirty minutes later. Godou was wolfing down all sorts of food that Erica had brought.

There were several paninis made from pork, chicken and spring vegetables. Boiled sausage. Prosciutto ham.

Thick slabs of horse meat steak. Steamed vegetables topped with hand-made mayonnaise style sauce.

Rabbit meat stewed with vegetables. Mineral water. Orange juice. Wine. Etc.

Grabbing food continually and stuffing them in his mouth, Godou chewed with relish, swallowing in huge gulps. At any rate, seeking nourishment was first priority--

Erica stared at Godou as if he was driven to eat and drink by some unknown force. An expression like she was observing some newly discovered rare species, deep in thought...

"By the way, I forgot to do something. I'll be right back."

Staying no longer, Erica left the room.

Godou simply gave a quick nod in response and continued his quest for nourishment, sweeping all the food away. Greatly satisfied, he lay on the bed once more.

Now that nutrients had been replenished, it was time for rest, sleep --

Sensing the entreaties of the body, he did as told without hesitation. In any case, it was time for sleep and recovery of energy . For the sake of a battle-ready body...

Having slept for who knows how many hours, it was time to wake up.

Godou found himself imprisoned.

"You're awake."

"Well then, let's begin with the interrogation."

A quiet gloomy voice suddenly spoke.

Godou found himself lying on something soft, with both his hands and feet restrained.

"Hey, hey! What is this? What do you intend to do to me!?"

Godou complained as he surveyed his surroundings.

He seemed to be inside a barn of some countryside farm. Stacks of hay were lying all around, and in fact, Godou had been sleeping on one of them. Both his wrists and ankles were bound by iron shackles.

In addition, looking down at Godou were two men in cosplay, each dressed in a gray robe.

They resembled actors from a blockbuster movie, like Jedi Knights in some kind of space odyssey or magi from a fantasy movie.

Since their hoods were pulled down completely, the men's faces could not be seen.

"I am a Japanese tourist and I don't think I deserve to be treated like this. Are you people sure you didn't get the wrong guy!?"

"...No. You are the right one."

One of the men answered quietly to Godou's protests, in fluent Japanese.

However, what little of his face that could be seen in the depths beneath the hood, was clearly a Caucasian face.

"You must be 'Kusanagi Godou,' right? We already received the news. Erica Blandelli the knight of Milan and the youth named Kusanagi had been wandering all over Sardinia."

To Godou's surprise, they even knew about Erica. The man turned his somber gaze towards Godou.

"...Trying to get to the bottom of our affairs is pointless. All I can say is that we are members of an ancient magic association. For the past week or so, we have been investigating the 'god' which had suddenly manifested."

Godou was greatly shocked. God. Did they really mean Verethragna?

"Erica Blandelli and the youth from Japan. Apparently traveled all over the place in pursuit of the god's trail. Then finally this morning, the god's presence suddenly vanished, and stability returned to the island..."

So the battle really happened after all.

Befriending that youth, having a battle to the death, and finally parting in such short time.

Recalling this incident, Godou felt a scorching sensation in his chest. The men suddenly continued:

"Under such conditions, we feared one possibility. Perhaps, the god who manifested on Sardinia had been defeated by Erica Blandelli, and she would be reborn as a 'Campione!'"

Erica defeated a god? And became what?

"Now that I think about it, that girl Erica did mention something similar--"

Just before the impending battle against Verethragna, he had a conversation with Erica.

Godou remembered clearly the word "Campione" being mentioned then.

"Oh, looks like you've got a clue. We hope you can explain carefully in detail..."

One of the hooded men said to Godou softly.

"The [Heretic God] manifesting on Sardinia on this occasion is a very important divinity for our [Church of the Eastern Magi] and could bring about revelation. Very likely, it is the god of victory, Verethragna..."

These people are associated with Verethragna!? Godou was shocked.

"If Miss Erica slew the war god we worship, it would be a very serious situation. We will have to bear the full force of our association down on her in order to avenge the god!"

"So, boy. This is the situation. Tell us where Erica-san is located right now!"

"If you decide to be stubborn, we have ways of making you talk! "

Noisily talking at the same time, they threatened.

"Y-Yes I know about that alright. But by the time I woke up I was already your captive. Besides, even if I knew why would I tell you people!?"

Godou yelled.

It sounded like they were seeking Erica for revenge. Of course he was not going to cooperate with them.

"I see. Then there's no choice... In the name of Mithra the god of contracts, I hereby command, truth be thy only law, honesty be thy only speech, prohibited are all falsehoods."

One of the men muttered suspiciously.

Godou reacted with a feeling he never experienced before. The man's words felt like they carried "power" which turned into something formless and colorless that began to entangle Godou's body.

Spell words!? This term entered his mind vaguely.

If spell words truly existed, perhaps they really took effect in this fashion.

But why could he sense such phenomena, why him!?

"Hmm. This youth, he deflected my magic?"

However, not only Godou but also the man who employed the spell words were surprised.

"He probably has some sort of protective magic guarding his body, right? Like spells for preventing the extraction of information for example, there are various ways to handle them."

"How befitting for the companion of a great knight of the [Copper Black Cross]..."

Protective magic? Obviously, Godou had no idea how to use that, so it must have been Erica who did it, right? But where on earth did she run off to -- just as he felt anxious.

"Then we are left with no other choice. If a reasonable methods fails, we must resort to barbaric ways."

One of the men made a very disconcerting statement.

"As a show of respect to the prestigious [Copper Black Cross], we will reveal our most vicious secret technique. A curse that boils the brain like a seal of death... Will be our offering to you. Even protective magic cannot stop this curse."

"If you don't want to die, you'd better be a good boy and tell us everything you know."

"Come, be out with it. Do it now before it's too late!"

Godou swallowed hard.

These people did not sound like they were joking. Magi were always doing these crazy ridiculous things. He already experienced enough of that over the past few days. However, he could not betray Erica.

Godou suppressed the surfacing fear of death as he glared angrily at the men.

"Hmm. Preparing yourself to die for the sake of friendship -- what a pity. Deprived of my blessing, whether the righteous or the bestial, all shall be bereft of luminance, and evil shall prevail!"

These spell words carried "power." That was the feeling.

Even though he felt it again, Godou did not know how to defend no matter how hard he pondered. There was nothing he could use as a shield. Furthermore, there was no time left to bluff and stall for time. At this point of no return, it was too late to regret.

It was too late. Godou could feel the onslaught of the deadly curse.

Clearly he had survived a battle against a god, but now he was going to die here? Really?

"Even our most vicious curse has been deflected!"

"Unbelievable... Who is this boy...?"

The two hooded men muttered in shock.

It was only natural. Even though he did not know the reason, the moment the spell words of the curse made contact with Godou's body they instantly vanished.

Then immediately.

"This is it, folks. To think that there actually existed people who dare attempt the foolish deed of kidnapping and confining my companion, Erica Blandelli's. Such utter lack of foresight is truly impressive indeed."

Suddenly, the door to the barn flew open.

Bathed beneath the rays of the setting sun, it was the gallant entrance of a beautiful girl whose fluttering reddish blonde hair adorned her like a crown. That beautiful face of hers, lustrously radiating such dominance and intellect, caused the gloomy robed men to cower back.

The one who appeared was Erica Blandelli, of course. The girl whom everyone sought.

Part 2

"Looks like I have no need to announce my name for a duel... I apologize for resorting to violence, but please return this person to me."

Smiling with a chuckle, Erica suddenly summoned a sword into her hand.

Cuore di Leone. Possessing a slender blade shining with clear luster, the magic sword of the lion. Godou clearly recalled the magic sword that had been used to great effect in the battle against Verethragna.

"Wait a minute, Erica Blandelli. Did you really slay a [Heretic God]?"

"The god-slaying Devil King -- did you become a Campione!?"

"Hoho, why don't you confirm the answer through battle?"

Completely unconcerned with the doubts of the retreating men, Erica smiled glamorously while she swung her sword. One flash, two flashes.

Godou was rendered speechless to see her wielding her sword without any hesitation at all.

This is no historical drama, are you really trying to kill these men!? Fear and unease welled up within Godou. But fortunately, these worries were unfounded.

What Erica sliced with her sword was the "power" surrounding the two robed men.

An unbelievable presence that protected them. Cuore di Leone sliced through it, causing the "power" to dissipate immediately.

"You don't even know how to use swords, and now that you've lost your protective spells, you two are no match for me."

"Tsk!" "Damn you!"

Their power severed by Erica, the two men traced complicated patterns with their fingers.

The patterns inscribed in the air produced "power," carrying some kind of deadly attribute. Sensing this presence, Godou was surprised again. Again. Why would I know something like that?

In spite of Godou's hopeless confusion, Erica did not stop moving.

She already took action before the men's "power" took effect. A gracefully delivered high kick.

Striking one of the men spectacularly in the back of his head, she knocked him out in one hit. The other man was struck in the chest by Cuore di Leone's hilt and he fainted from the pain.

The battle ended effortlessly with Erica's victory.

"There, it's done. Their fates will depend on luck."

Erica had found a rope somewhere in the depths of the barn and tied up the unconscious men.

The sky at dusk was visible through the open door. Night was fast approaching.

"These guys are probably from somewhere in the orient... Maybe affiliated with some religion. Probably Zoroastrianism? Verethragna belongs to that religion, right?"

Godou inquired. The restraints on his hands and feet had been released.

"These guys are nowhere near that level of respectability. After all, they were using the magic of forbidden curses. They're worthless magi, probably from some sort of ancient cult that worships the Persian pantheon."

"Cult... Like those newly risen religion... That's the kind of impression I get."

The word "cult" was a rather fitting description of the two men's demeanor.

"Probably some association of evil alignment. I can't believe they used [Brain Destruction] magic without any hesitation."

"Of evil alignment -- an evil cult, basically. Well said... But wait a minute."

Looking down at the unconscious men, Godou realized.

"Erica, I can't believe you stood back and watched them do all those things to me!?"

"I simply wanted to confirm to what extent you remain human."

"R-Remain human?"

"Yes. Congratulations, Godou. Today marks the day of your rebirth as a 'monster.' Think of it as a second birthday."

Erica smiled sweetly. With such unforgettable loveliness, it was a glamorous smile as befitted Erica Blandelli.

But to Godou, it felt akin to the smile of the devil Mephistopheles when he restored Dr. Faust's youth. Like a so-called elegant devil...

"If you want an explanation, it's because I already know. I am completely unworried that the magic used by humans -- even mystic techniques of the highest level, could harm you in any way. "

"What do you mean? But actually, I did have this really strange feeling starting from a while ago."

During the scene just now, he had sensed "power" -- ?

Could it be, that was magic? Stuff like magical power or spell words? Realizing that, Godou trembled with fear as Erica asserted with all smiles.

"How should I put it? Yes... You are no longer an ordinary human. Kusanagi Godou has become a god-slayer, a Campione. That's basically it."

"G-God-slayer? Campione?"

"Right, didn't I tell you before the battle against Verethragna? That there were only six god-slayers in this world. Devil Kings who usurped the authorities of gods. Campiones. You have officially become the seventh."

"Whaaaat -- !?"

The robed duo had crept into the room at the inn while Godou was snoring away soundly. Erica happened to be away at the time. In order to obtain information, they tied up Godou and brought him to a barn in the outskirts of the village. Upon discovering the situation, Erica hurried over, thereby resulting in the rescue drama that occurred just now.

"Looks like stray magi from some small cult, acting rashly without using their brains."

Walking along a country road at night, Erica concluded arbitrarily.

As a side note, the robed men were left behind in bondage.

"I agree on that point. But Erica, when you left the room back then, were you using me as bait?"

Walking alongside the blonde beauty, Godou whispered.

Oh well, it was only speculation. At the time, perhaps Erica really had to leave to do something as she claimed... That line of thinking was only reasonable.

But another possibility occurred to Godou.

Yes, take for example, what if given Erica's intelligence and keen sense, she had actually noticed the appearance of the robed men? Furthermore, she wanted to confirm Godou's current condition.

Her mind of devil's...

It would not be strange to suspect 'Erica had hidden herself to observe what would happen to Godou if he were left alone.'

"Calling it bait or whatever, that is such an inappropriate description. I simply chose the most interesting and dramatic method I could think of, that's all."

Contrary to expectations, Erica was proud of herself.

What a strange and novel feeling it was, to completely lose all gratitude to his savior.

"You, how should I put it... Your character is way not cool."

Godou muttered emphatically.

Recalling their first encounter, her attitude had been very displeasing back then. However, having experienced life and death situations together with her, their distance seemed to have shrunk slightly.

That was the situation. Godou began to understand a little. Erica was not simply smart, she was utterly brilliant. On top of that, she was a terrifying devil.

She was the kind of person whose application of her wits prioritized personal amusement.

"Why am I always surrounded by people with weird personalities?"

Godou recalled his closest family, relatives and friends.

But thanks to that, he was not intimated by a woman like Erica. Even though she was difficult to handle, she was still a good person at heart. The fact that she was a friend remained unchanged.

"Whatever." Godou muttered to himself. Erica immediately spoke up.

"Oh my, to think that amongst Godou's acquaintances, there exist many people with slight resemblance to me. How broad your social circle must be! I'm impressed, slightly."

"...Anyway, let's head back first. It's time to get some rest tonight."

Impressed by Erica's positive acceptance of her weird personality, Godou suggested their next move. However, Erica shook her head.

"No, those two from just now might have other companions. We should leave this village as quickly as possible. Sure, we could take on another battle, but there's no need for such unnecessary risk."

"Come to think of it, you were the one they were targeting."

"What are you talking about? The one being targeted is you, Godou. You are the Devil King and the seventh god-slaying Campione."

As Godou stared with wide-eyed confusion, Erica explained gently as if instructing a young child.

"Take the two-man team just now, there should be many people involved in magic who have concluded that 'Erica Blandelli slew a god' based on circumstantial evidence. But sooner or later, they will realize their error and discover the truth. The one who slew a god was actually a Japanese completely unversed in magic, Kusanagi Godou."

"I am a god-slayer..."

"Yes. In order to investigate the death of the [Heretic God] who manifested on Sardinia, magic associations not only from Italy but also the rest of Europe will send investigators over. Well, that said, their attention will be focused on me initially."

"....."

"In the near future, you will begin to understand the authority you usurped from Verethragna. The term authority refers to sacred powers originally held by gods. Great powers wielded by the heavenly gods. Taking possession of such powers will not permit a human to live a normal life."

Godou listened to Erica's fluent outflow of information in dumbstruck silence.

Nevertheless, he finally managed to speak up.

"But I should have the choice to not use that power, right?"

"I wonder? In my view, if you were really the type to choose that road, you would never have fought Verethragna in the first place."

"But isn't the situation completely different from yesterday?"

Calming down slightly, Godou continued.

"The god incident is resolved, so I will return to Japan. In that case, I will sever all relations with gods, magic, and all these troublesome things--"

"How complacent. You've really forgotten completely, Godou."

Erica exclaimed with great surprise.

"There was a message for you. Since this is the decree of the king who commands the oriental divine realm, please pay careful

attention -- Your first enemy was the war god Verethragna, the second one is me!"

Erica mimicked a certain someone's horrifyingly deep tone of voice.

"Very soon I will recover all my power. When that time comes, take the place of that war god, my spears of fury will be aimed at you! Polish your sword and wait for my arrival! -- Basically that."

"...Melqart!?"

Godou cursed his stupidity. There was yet another god who had manifested on this island!

"Yes. The Phoenician divine king Melqart flew away somewhere after that. He prepares for the battle with Kusanagi Godou. The great king who boldly declared he would sink the island of Sardinia into the bottom of the sea if any islanders came to interfere. The impending tragedy offers little room for optimism ."

For the sake of defeating Verethragna, Godou had made use of Melqart's power.

As Godou realized he had to take responsibility, he trembled... Oh no, was it coming again, was he forced to battle a god again?

"How about it, Godou? If you declare you will never fight a [Heretic God] again, I won't force you."

"As much as I'd like to do that..."

Godou sighed. Returning home at such a time was not acceptable. Even if Erica would let him go, he could not permit himself to do so.

"I will remain until Melqart's incident is resolved. Somehow I keep finding myself at the eye of the storm."

Godou lamented as Erica shrugged.

"Digging your own grave would be the appropriate expression, wouldn't you agree? Well then, let's head to Cagliari together. It's easier to hide in densely populated urban areas and it also facilitates information gathering."

Cagliari was the largest city on the island of Sardinia. A port town.

Erica's suggestion was perfectly reasonable. Apparently she was not only capable of strange mischievous ideas but also rational contemplation. Naturally gifted in so many ways, rather than wasting her prodigious talents, she really ought to put heaven's gifts to good use...

At the same time as being deeply impressed by this woman, Godou suddenly realized something else.

"I agree with what you suggested, but is it okay for you not to go home?"

"Oh my, what are you talking about?"

"I mean going back to Milan. Weren't you sent here from Milan for a mission?"

Erica had mentioned her origins a number of times.

She hailed from the northern Italian metropolis of Milan. A mage belonging to that secret association called the whatever [Copper Black Cross], and a member of the elite known as Great Knights or something like that. She was probably someone important in her uncle's organization, but Erica sounded like she was going to continue accompanying Godou.

"I haven't decided when to go back yet. I haven't even reported the Verethragna incident back to the association either."

"Eh? Is that really okay for you to do that?"

"Not really. I'm neglecting my duties as a knight and even shutting off my cellphone. Nevertheless, it is necessary in light of the bigger picture."

"At least give them a call. I'm sure they're quite worried about you."

"If I did that, I would most likely be ordered to return. That is what I'm avoiding."

Godou recalled that Erica was a promising child prodigy shouldering great expectations. It was doubtful that the organization would want to risk such important talent in a dangerous environment.

"I could send out a false report, but things would be over as soon as the deception is revealed. In any case, I have no wish to leave Sardinia for now. Clearly when something so interesting is happening, it'd be foolish to leave the center of the action. Definitely unacceptable!"

Asserting all those troublesome god-related affairs as " interesting," Erica was surely out of her mind.

Godou was once again impressed by her. At the same time, he realized another possibility, and secretly thanked her. Perhaps she chose to accompany him out of concern for the clueless Kusanagi Godou.

More than likely, this was only wishful thinking, but somehow Godou believed in it.

Part 3

As they set off for their destination of Cagliari, Erica wanted to reach a decision on their means of transport.

"Taxis... Do they even drive out to these remote rural areas? Or should we wait for a bus?"

"In a place like this, there's probably no more than two or three buses a day, right?"

Hence, Godou and Erica walked past the bus station.

Instead, they wandered around the village and chanced upon a middle-aged Italian man who was touring around in a rental car. After stating their request, they managed to hitch a ride.

Not knowing any Italian, Godou stayed silent and left the talking to Erica.

Not only was she beautiful but also well-versed in social skills, Erica sat in the passenger seat beside the driver, chatting amiably with the middle-aged man.

The sun had completely set. Carrying the trio, the car raced across the road at night.

"...Hmm?"

Sitting in the back seat, Godou was perplexed. Somehow, he was able to vaguely grasp what the two people in front were talking about -- that was what he felt. In that very instant.

(Where are you two going afterwards? Eh, Cagliari? As for me, I'm going to take a leisurely tour of the island's western region...)

That was what he felt the man was saying.

Soon after, the car reached a town called Oristano and they parted ways with the man.

The time was after nine at night. Godou and Erica checked into a little inn (with separate rooms, of course), agreeing to take the 8:30am train to Cagliari the next morning.

...As a side note, this was when Godou first discovered Erica's habit of sleeping in.

Finding her still asleep at their appointed meeting time, Godou had to knock on her door until his hand hurt in order to wake her up.

Facing the Italian mainland was the Mediterranean Sea.

Situated on the surface of this peaceful and scenic body of water , the island of Sardinia covered an area roughly the size of Japan's Shikoku island. The entire island comprised the autonomous region of Sardinia, with Cagliari as its capital.

Cagliari was an ancient port city dating back to the eighth century BCE.

The seafaring Phoenicians had landed on the island and started constructing ports and towns.

"I must say, regarding the completely appalling taste of that particular confectionery, I really need to go on a detailed diatribe."

After the train arrived at Cagliari, Erica murmured repeatedly to herself as they stepped out of the station.

"It couldn't be helped. If you hadn't slept in, you would've been able to eat a proper breakfast."

Shrugging, Godou said.

The train traveled for close to an hour and a half for the journey to Cagliari. Because they did not have time for breakfast, Godou had bought some chocolate at the station's snack shop, and even prepared a portion for Erica as well.

The taste was terrible beyond belief. Summing up, it was too sweet. So sweet that it made his teeth hurt.

European and American confectionery were, for the most part, too sweet for Japanese tastes. But even Erica had the same reaction. "This thing calling itself chocolate, truly serves up a blasphemous challenge to the definition of strange-tasting" was her comment. Apparently, this chocolate was universally bad-tasting beyond national boundaries.

Nevertheless, the two of them still finished it without waste.

"Clearly if there was time, we could have bought something to eat at a more normal shop..."

"Ludicrous! You are speaking as if I were responsible. If you went ahead and bought what you wanted in advance, there'd be no problem!"

"So the option of you getting up on time does not exist!?"

Erica turned her face away in disgust at Godou's retort.

"No, it does not! Just because you have been reborn as a god-slayer, you think you have the right to disturb me, Erica Blandelli, during the sanctity of my slumber? It is an utmost

privilege that neither kings nor emperors in the whole wide world are entitled to!"

"You simply like sleeping in, so what's with all that justification. .."

"Well, whatever. Even though the taste was terrible, it made the experience interesting instead. Hence, Godou, I will not pursue the matter further this once. Offer me your joyful gratitude."

"What's with this downward gaze of superiority... Anyway, Erica."

Godou suddenly said to the girl who had too much personality:

"You finished everything despite complaining about the taste, and even went as far to say it was interesting. So you don't actually dislike junk food?"

"How could that possibly be true? Given the choice, I am the type who always chooses food of the best quality."

With that, Erica tossed that reddish blonde hair of hers that adorned her head like a crown.

"However, when there is no choice, I simply possess the special skill of ignoring the food's taste. As a knight, my body is an important asset. Regardless of the food quality, nourishment cannot be neglected."

"Your body seems to have developed well in spite of everything ..."

"Remember this well. My personal philosophy bestows greater respect upon poor-tasting food that is marked by individualistic distinction, compared to bland cuisine lacking in style. Judged by this criteria, even though your choice was not optimal, it was not poor either."

In any case, Godou and Erica were back in Sardinia's largest city , Cagliari.

An ancient seaside capital with orderly stone-built streets. Filled with the vigor of urban life, it was also host to the "casual" atmosphere possessed by tourist vacation spots.

"By the way, Godou. Now that we have arrived in Cagliari, the choice of 'Announcing your name as the Campione and commanding the magi of Sardinia' is open to you."

"Right, but that's not going to happen."

Godou immediately responded to Erica's suggestion as they left the station.

"Even if I've really become a Campi-whatever as you say, it doesn't feel real to me at all."

"Well, I guess the chances of people being skeptical would be too high if we announce the Devil King's birth before you get a grasp on your authority. Oh well, there's no urgency at this point. So, let's start gathering information."

"About Melqart, right?"

"Yes, that too, requires reliable and trustworthy sources of information. Contacting local magi at such a time would be standard operating procedure... But given a place like Sardinia, it might be difficult to find someone first rate who could prove useful in a fight against a [Heretic God]."

Erica's murmurs prompted Godou to recall a certain someone.

"Then how about we contact Lucretia-san?"

The Witch of Sardinia, Lucretia Zola. She was the root cause for Godou's visit to this island, and the older friend who had offered minor guidance to Godou and Erica.

After the battle against Verethragna, they had not contacted her due to the various busy happenings.

In that case, Godou wanted to contact her as well as give her a report.

"In actual fact, I already called Lucretia while Godou was sleeping yesterday. To give her a report on the entire incident. At the time, she said 'Since things have calmed for now, I will have a good sleep to recover my energy. So I won't be available for now.' From the way she sounded, I'd expect her to sleep for two or three days."

"Continuously? Without even waking in between?"

"Yes. Magical sleep for the purpose of recovering exhaustion of the body and mind in as short time as possible. Such thorough rest

is necessary for eliminating core fatigue, in preparation for future emergencies."

"Come to think of it, Lucretia-san did mention she had exhausted her magical power..."

Godou worried about the witch as he felt impressed by Erica's attention to detail.

Due to her outward appearance, it was very easy to forget the fact that Lucretia was actually quite elderly (apparently).

When they parted ways, Lucretia did look rather haggard back then. She had gotten caught up in a fight between the two gods, Verethragna and Melqart, a week or so ago. In order to escape, she depleted all her power.

"Right, Lucretia also said that, if we need any assistance during this time, there's a suitable candidate. Fortunately, he happens to live in Cagliari."

"Well then, let's go find him."

"However, Lucretia also mentioned... This person is rather flippant in character, and 100% untrustworthy."

"I see... Since you come with Lucretia Zola's introductions, I cannot ignore you."

David Bianchi spoke in a manner that gave off strange pretentious airs.

The current location was a mansion on a hill overlooking the Cagliari harbor and Golfo degli Angeli.[1] Like Rome, Cagliari was also a city built on seven hills and with many districts located on elevated ground.

Given such a magnificent mansion built on this kind of a location, it was truly a residence that exemplified the lifestyles of the rich.

In the reception room, Godou and Erica were sitting face to face with Bianchi.

"I am already aware of the matter of two gods descending here. I also know one of them is Melqart. Based on the other god's identity as an oriental deity, I speculate him to be Verethragna, is that right?"

Worthy of admiration, the mage David Bianchi spoke.

He was a handsome man who appeared to be twenty-five or six in age. Dressed impeccably in a well-tailored suit, he gave off a sense of vanity like some sort of lady-killer.

"Yes, based on what we heard from Lucretia, you are an outstanding geomancist.[2] We wish to employ your magical skill to help track down Melqart's whereabouts."

Erica spoke in lady-like tones while Godou remained silent on the side.

Having been told by Erica that her companion only spoke Japanese, Bianchi watched Godou with great interest. However, he immediately switched to conversing in fluent Japanese.

"Well, there's no problem. It's the least I could do out of obligation to Lucretia. However, I hope you can enlighten me. Is it really true that warlord Verethagna met his demise at Melqart's hands?"

"Yes, it's true. Kusanagi Godou here and I were eyewitnesses to the fact."

Erica was lying.

She had concealed the truth when she recounted the incident. Bianchi made an exaggerated smile after going "Hmph" with an air of skepticism.

"In any case, let me begin preparing for the physiognomy.[3] Could you please be patient while I get the necessary tools ready?"

Saying that, he left the reception room.

"...Hey Erica, that Bianchi guy, isn't he kind of flippant?"

"...That's right. Not one to conceal his ulterior motives, he is a rather small-minded person, to put things delicately. But since he is said to be a capable person, let's observe the situation for now."

Since the two of them were left behind, they conversed in whispers.

"Since this is his home ground, it would be very disadvantageous for us as intruders to engage him in hostilities... Be that as it may, we cannot back down."

"Really? Isn't he supposed to be a powerful person?"

"Well, only 'so-so.' He may be considered first rate, but not to the level of *fuoriclasse*.[4] If I focus on protecting myself with my best defensive spell, Bianchi would most likely fail to breach it. With no other recourse, perhaps he would target you instead..."

Erica began to stare at Godou unerringly.

"In that case, the target is not the one in trouble."

"Eh?"

"Regarding matters of Devil King Campiones, I've had a number of opportunities to learn from a certain Princess. Combined with my personal experience -- I expect the result to be rather grim."

Erica pronounced solemnly like some sort of prophet.

Part 4

After about an hour, Bianchi returned and led Godou and Erica to a different room.

The Bianchi mansion was quite vast and its long corridors reflected this fact accordingly. The emerald-green Mediterranean

Sea was visible through the windows. Thanks to the mansion's location on a hill near the sea, the spectacular view was unrivaled.

Godou whispered to Erica as he walked along this corridor of the rich.

"By the way, what is 'geomancy'?"

"In terms that orientals like Godou would easily understand, it is a type of magic similar to 'Feng Shui.' Magical rituals that allow one to read the earth and the flow of its essence, and to manipulate them according to one's wishes. For increasing the prosperity of oneself, one's affiliations, as well as the nation."

"Ah... Feng Shui. Indeed it is fitting for the rich."

Wearing yellow clothes would bring monetary fortune. Placing items at specified auspicious locations to increase luck.

Erica's explanations prompted Godou to recall the origins of the Japanese "wide show."[5]

"When a [Heretic God] manifests, the earth at that location and its essence will be affected greatly. Given an accomplished geomancist, it is possible to find out the deity's latest information -- location, current condition, as well as observe where the deity might manifest next."

Soon they arrived at the destination.

The high ceilings stretched all the way up. The room was so spacious, a tennis court could probably fit with room to spare. That was how large it was.

In the center of the room was a large marble table, with a huge " model" sitting on top of it.

It was a three dimensional topographical map of the terrain surrounding the Mediterranean. On this roughly 5m x 2m rectangular space, Spain, Italy, Greece, Turkey, the Mediterranean Sea and various North African countries were beautifully recreated in exquisite detail.

Must be some sort of expensive hobby -- Godou concluded to himself.

"Well then. Let us try to track down the 'presence' of Melqart you witnessed."

Bianchi picked up a beaker containing a brown powder.

"This powder was made by grinding up fragments of a jar recently unearthed from the ruins of the ancient Phoenician home port of Tyre."

The powder was poured from the beaker onto the model.

It landed exactly on the south side of Sardinia -- the location equivalent to Cagliari, Godou and Erica's current position.

Then the powder began to move on its own. Slithering over the model like a snake, it rushed towards the Mediterranean Sea, heading east. An even bigger island than Sardinia lay in that direction.

"The island of Sicily? Melqart went to Sicily?"

Bianchi nodded as Erica stared in wide-eyed surprise.

"Looks like it. The Phoenician's sphere of influence not only includes Sardinia but Sicily as well. Perhaps in search of his identity, Melqart seeks the root of his existence by moving to a sacred domains closer to his homeland."

The city of Tyre was apparently the stronghold of the Phoenicians who worshiped Melqart.

Tyre was located in the region known as Lebanon in modern times. Relative to Sardinia, it was in the "east" direction. I see. Godou understood.

"So that's that. But actually, I also prepared something else."

Bianchi picked up a test tube containing a small amount of white powder.

"This powder was made from shavings of a stone tablet unearthed from Zoroastrian temple ruins dating back to the Sassanid Empire of Persia. It was prepared for tracking down the ' presence' of the war god of victory, Verethragna."

Reversing the test tube, the white powder was poured onto the model.

Even though it landed in the middle of the Italian mainland, the white powder began to move on its own and crossed the sea, slithering towards Cagliari, on the south side of Sardinia.

"Erica-kun... If the Verethragna was really killed by Melqart as you claimed, this powder should have vanished instead. However, its current state is obvious."

Bianchi smiled smugly.

"Based on the physiognomy, Verethragna died by a human's hand. Consequently, the warlord's authority was usurped, and the new owner is currently in Cagliari. Most likely, that person is you."

Saying that, the pretentious handsome man glared straight at Godou!

"While I was making you wait, I observed the spiritual physiognomy within this mansion and discovered a swirling ' presence' that hung around like gunpowder. Rather than you, Erica-kun, it was a mysterious 'something' hidden in this youth here, waiting for an opportunity to rampage!"

"David Bianchi does not fail to see past deception. So even if this were the truth, what problems would it pose?"

Erica declared with absolute elegance and fearlessness.

"If Kusanagi Godou is a Campione -- the first thing you must do is bow down to the new [King] and express congratulations to his ascension to the throne, offering your utmost fear and respect."

"Yes. Indeed that is correct."

Convinced by a beautiful girl younger than him, Bianchi smiled wryly.

"I've had this notion for a very long time. Indeed, Campiones are those who have slain gods. However, do you really believe they are all worthy of being [Kings]? Our king -- Salvatore Doni is a perfect example. Who could believe he is such a great idiot, an utter moron!"

A certain Mr. Salvatore. So the sixth god-slayer is an Italian? But what disrespectful words. Would Erica, who keeps insisting on reverence to the king, get angry as a result? --Those were Godou's thoughts.

"Well, Sir Salvatore is one of a kind. You can't really generalize from one example."

Unexpectedly, Erica did not show any intention to object.

"Only the sword. He is a man who has utterly no merit in anything other than the sword, right? Even if it is said that no amount of spells will work, provided we have the intent -- don't you think that we are able to do it?"

"Are you actually talking about defeating a Campione?"

"Correct. Just as they have slain gods, we too, can defeat Devil Kings. At least, when my opponent is an inexperienced Campione who is full of openings!"

Bianchi declared with absolute confidence and stared at Godou once more.

"My mastery of physiognomy is not limited to the essence of the earth but also extends to the observation of facial contours... That boy there has no history of magic amongst his ancestors. Neither does he have any martial arts training nor experience on the battlefield. Usurping a god's authority is merely pearls before swine for him."

Godou could not help but feel shocked. This man was able to read that much simply by observing a face? As befitted a guy versed in magic, possessing amazing but inconspicuous skills.

"For the purpose of proving my theory that kings are not absolute conquerors, isn't it great that an opponent has fallen into my grasp? Hmph, kindly do humor my little wish!"

Bianchi's glare gradually intensified.

Immediately, Godou felt goosebumps on the back of his neck. Perhaps, this was what was commonly known as "killing intent." He could sense clearly dangerous thoughts coming from that man. It was not difficult to understand.

Rather than the pretentious handsome mage, it was the changes in his own body which made Godou more confused.

"David Bianchi... I once considered you barely a first-rate mage, but apparently I was wrong. You are merely half of that and more than likely, you'll never progress beyond this foundation."

Sharp-tongued and acrimonious, the speaker was Erica beyond a doubt.

"Such naive notions, surely must have crossed the minds of how many thousands of magi? As expected of a man who pretends to be some sort of master inhabiting a corner of a place like Sardinia, such shallow thinking is only fitting."

Erica's sardonic tone of voice was filled with her usual magnificent flair.

Unlike the times when she admonished Godou as "fool," that fleeting sense of cuteness was absent. Only words of mockery were delivered.

"Within prestigious associations like my [Copper Black Cross], in order to eliminate this kind of misconception and impress upon members the overwhelming power of the kings -- or rather, ridiculous creatures for whom common logic does not apply, we would use anecdotes of past kings as teaching materials for a thorough education."

Erica burst into a smile.

"But clearly you did not have this opportunity. Even though I agree with your assessment of Sir Salvatore as an idiot, I thoroughly despise your notion of 'possibly defeating them.' This sort of delusional dream should be saved for your eternal slumber beneath a grave!"

How distinctive of Erica's style, this exquisite manner of mockery.

"Hmph, truly the words of one who hails from a prestigious family that wags their tail at kings. But you are ill-advised to forget one fact. This place is my mansion, and to you, it is enemy territory -- Prepare to die!"

The instant Bianchi called out, the floor beneath Erica transformed amorphously, manifesting into a sharp and massive conical shape, extending upwards and flying as fast as an arrow.

However, Erica lightly took a step backwards to evade the surprise attack from below.

"Knowest that thou art no immortal god, rememberest thy mortality as a son of man!"[6]

As Bianchi yelled out again, Godou could sense magic activating.

This was probably the strongest magic he had felt to this point. The house began to shake and rumble noisily.

"Darkness" was hanging all around Erica.

A dark mist had suddenly appeared, pervading Erica's surroundings, enveloping the blonde maiden like a black cloud obscuring the shining moon!

Godou was certain without reason. This was extremely dangerous magic.

Living things that came into contact with that mist will rapidly approach death. Whether through the absorption of life force, incurring a fatal disease, or the stopping of the heart, Godou's instincts told him, it was extremely vicious magic that stole life away!

Godou felt some kind of switch opening in his body.

You dare do something like that to Erica -- my friend! Intense flames of anger were roused within him as ferocious fighting spirit simmered. Battle spirit made him feel as hot as burning and filled his entire body with power for combat.

On the other hand, exposed to this malicious attack, Erica began :

"For the sake of maintaining order in Rome, the Senate decreed the suspension of imperium! O Steel of the Lion, layest thyself down as the foundation!"

Fluently she recited the incantation.

In response, the magic sword of the lion, Cuore di Leone, suddenly appeared in Erica's hand. At the same time, it transformed into a chain with ten links, shining with silver luster.

The chain's head and tail ends joined together to form a " circular chain."

These ten chain links encircled Erica, forming a protective barrier against the mist of darkness.

"Senatus consultum ultimum, hereby decreed!"[7]

Erica proceeded to finish the incantation and completed the spell.

Godou managed to barely understand what happened. This was probably defensive magic. Even if Bianchi went all out, he probably cannot breach it.

"How's that? A protective barrier erected from the magic sword Cuore di Leone and Senatus consultum ultimum, do you have any way of breaching it?"

"Probably -- not. But with that, you cannot attack either."

Bianchi's lips displayed a twisted smile in response to Erica's challenge.

"A protective barrier erected using the spell of Senatus consultum ultimum is equivalent to a castle in durability.

However, the spellcaster cannot take a single step out of its confines. Isn't that nice? While you protect yourself, you will be unable to guard this new Campione boy here."

Godou shrank back. Clearly Bianchi's next move was going to be...

"Then you're offering me a free hand to go after this boy?"

"Please go ahead, be my guest."

Furthermore, Erica was speaking with an expression that said " By all means"!

"The reason why Campiones are regarded as kings and conquerors -- beings who have completely transcended the limitations imposed by laws of nature, I hope you can savor the experience thoroughly. If perchance you survive this encounter, perhaps it would serve as a wonderful lesson."

Godou gasped. It really developed as he feared.

"So that's the situation, Godou, I leave things in your hands. Show that poor ignorant fool the terror of your kind. Don't worry, I expect you to have little trouble."

Saying that, Erica smiled glamorously.

Beautiful and tempting, it was an expression that was best encapsulated by the description, the "devil's smile."

Part 5

"Wait a minute, Erica, you want me to defeat that guy?"

"Yes, using the authority you usurped from the Persian Warlord Verethragna (even though we don't know what it is yet), there should be something (or some pain) that should allow you to easily trample a mage of that level."

"Don't talk about 'easily' in an emergency like this!"

Godou could not help but retort against Erica's whispered suggestion.

Over on the side, Bianchi was also displeased.

"How dare you describe me as simply being 'of that level.' You are mistaken if you think I'm a man whose only skill is geomancy. Just as you saw, I've been through many real battles."

"Anyway, what he's trying to say is 'I'm not some kind of flunkie.' Just ignore him."

Godou figured it out. Erica was clearly trying to instigate a fight !

Angered, Bianchi was glaring at Godou severely.

"...The Seventh Devil King. I have no grudge against you personally, but as a man, I cannot refuse a challenge. So would you kindly have a duel with me?"

Actually, you are too small-minded as a man if you get offended so easily by mere words.

Godou suppressed those words that nearly spilled out of his mouth. Why does that girl Erica want Bianchi to fight him? Indiscernible motives.

"Please be calm. Even though I slew a god, I don't even know what happened exactly. But as you can see, I'm a pacifist. I really mean you no harm completely."

With an earnest voice, Godou tried to plead his sincerity.

Kusanagi Godou was a pacifist. A civilized man who did not like being in conflict with others. Even though Erica was an amazing girl, and unexpectedly noble, she was someone who could immediately draw her sword at the slightest disagreement.

As fellow humans, they should first negotiate and reach mutual understanding.

"Regrettably, this has nothing to do with your pacifism. This battle concerns something that belongs to me. Please give up and humor me... O Forest!"

Bianchi's strange mutterings at the end of his speech were spell words.

Power — magical power was produced, making rustling noises, producing effects, forming a "spell."

Without noticing, Godou had somehow accepted and gotten used to his new ability to sense magical power and presences.

What mysterious phenomenon will be born from this magic —?

Noticing that, Godou was rendered speechless. The wall behind Bianchi was undergoing a "change." This was clearly a room in a mansion, but "that spot" had changed into a different scene.

The wall of the mansion had disappeared, and somehow been replaced by a "dense forest."

The forest was filled with flourishing vegetation and greenery. The vigorous plants did not seem like Mediterranean species and were clearly tropical rainforest flora.

"This is distorting space and connecting to a rainforest somewhere!"

Erica immediately informed Godou. As expected of magic, even something like this could be done.

"Tiger! Using those immortal claws and eyes, your terror shall create balance!"

Bianchi uttered spell words again, casting new magic.

That was probably a "summoning" spell. From the depths of the dense forest, two shining spots the brilliant color of emerald were approaching. Those were eyes of a beast. With yellow and black fur, that tenacious, massive, wild beast — a "tiger" indeed.

An extremely massive tiger, probably weighing 300kg. Furthermore, there was more than one.

A second tiger began walking out from the depths of the forest...

"Even if magic is cast on a Campione, it will be completely deflected. It's a well-known fact."

Bianchi whispered. Godou finally understood.

Back when spells were being cast in the storeroom, none of them had any effect on Godou.

"However, there are other avenues. Take the bones and the face for example... Because all it requires is the appearance, techniques like physiognomy were usable like earlier. Targeting a Campione's powerful divine aura, investigative magic can be used to locate them."

Bianchi looked upon the two huge tigers in the room with great satisfaction.

"Since objects summoned by magic can cause damage, controlling these artificial magic beasts will work — hey [King], these fellows are man-eating tigers accustomed to the taste of human flesh and blood. No matter how peacefully you try to negotiate, they won't listen to you."

Man-eating!? Godou felt his body stiffen in fear.

The two ferocious tigers followed Bianchi, growling as they stared at Godou with their resplendent eyes. At the same time, they snarled and ground their teeth, saliva flowing from their mouths.

Truly beasts summoned by magic. They seemed to be waiting for the order to attack.

Was there no way to escape!? As Godou glanced at the exit, the steel door closed itself shut with a crash. Immediately, the click of a lock could be heard.

This also seemed to be magic. Godou had a hopeless feeling.

Locked in a room with two man-eating tigers, it really seemed like a hopeless situation. What should he do? How could he win against these things!?

—Seek victory in earnest, with raging battle spirit. Godou proceeded to whisper:

"I am the strongest, holding all victory in my hands..."

Muttering, as if talking to himself.

"All evil-doers, tremble before me. The powerful but unjust cannot vanquish me."

Further muttering. This was scripture that Verethragna had once chanted. The god of victory sleeping within Godou — the power, usurped from that youth and now inherited by Godou, told him the spell words.

Godou dispelled the tigers' existence from his mind and closed his eyes. Appearing in the depths of his vision were ten forms.

The first was a gust of wind. Next was a bull. Then a white stallion. A camel. A boar. A glorious fifteen-year-old youth. A high-speed flying bird of prey. A ram. A goat. And finally, a warrior wielding a golden sword —!

"I am Verethragna, destroyer of obstacles! The strongest guardian with the most victories under his belt! I seek battle! I seek a formidable foe to bring me defeat!"

Loud and clear, that youth's voice. Godou heard it once again after a day.

I see. So this is that guy's authority? I should use this to fight!

"Godou, watch out!"

Hearing Erica's warning, Godou sprang into action, his eyes still closed.

He evaded the attack by jumping sideways. Only then did he open his eyes. Relying on vision would have been too slow, that was what his instincts told him.

One of the man-eating tigers had jumped to where Godou was previously standing.

Its ferocious teeth only caught air. It was a splendid evasion. However, the tigers still remained. The other tiger pounced ferociously at Godou who still had not recovered from his jumping posture.

A massive tiger weighing over 300kg. Yet its huge body was flexible and agile.

It charged forward with speed far surpassing humans. But most incredibly, Godou was able to watch its charge very clearly — not only could he discern it, he could also dodge it.

Godou already had excellent dynamic vision originally.

Thanks to that, in his past baseball days, he was able to hit average fastballs. At peak condition, he could even see the ball trajectory clearly.

—What he saw now felt similar to back then.

Ultimately, an average middle school student's fastball was on a completely different level compared to that of a charging man-eating tiger.

But then again, there was no time to ponder such a question. Godou crouched down.

Rolling on the floor like a log, he evaded the tiger's attack. Though it was undignified, he did not care. It was fine as long as it worked.

"What!?"

Seeing Godou's sudden agility, Bianchi was shocked.

This guy was not as incompetent as Erica described. Godou suddenly concluded without reason. If the blonde beautiful female knight was assigned a score of ten, that guy should be around six or so.

Godou proceeded to glance at Erica.

She was giving that look again. An expression full of interest, as if observing a newly discovered rare beast.

—This was what that girl wanted to see?

Figuring out the intentions of his "partner," Godou was speechless. She's truly like a devil! For the sake of investigating the power and constitution Godou had obtained, Erica deliberately incited Bianchi.

Godou supported himself with his hands against the wall and stood up.

Danger had yet to pass. If he continued rolling on the floor, it would be like an invitation for the tigers to attack. He suddenly noticed at this time.

Eh? In my current condition, perhaps... A sense of certainty suddenly surfaced.

Then he carefully examined the artificial tigers.

This sort of strong and wild tiger, could not possibly exist in nature. But the man who had usurped [Victory]'s authority, held the power to match that kind of strength —

Pushing with both hands against the wall, Godou imagined the wall's collapse. Gritting his teeth, he began to yell.

"Guh — Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!"

This scene could only be described as ludicrous.

The "wall" crumbled and collapsed from Godou's mighty push.

This mansion's wall — the one opposite to where Bianchi was standing, and the stone wall connected to the forest. With a clattering sound, it collapsed from Godou's arm strength.

No, this unyielding might could not have been produced from arm muscles.

A terrifying and massive power was being transmitted from the ground that Godou stood on. This sacred might was produced from the essence of the earth.

This power was indeed Verethragna's second incarnation, the [Bull]. Godou finally understood.

"Tsk. No matter how strong you are, there's no meaning without battle technique. Go!"

Bianchi ordered the tigers.

Godou swiftly went outside the walls — to the garden of the house. For no particular reason. He simply felt like it, which was why he deliberately destroyed the wall.

Furthermore, he immediately realized there was some truth in what Bianchi said.

Godou's survival instincts and ability to evade danger had been explosively amplified by his becoming a Campione. Nevertheless, continually running away from the two man-eating tigers was not an easy task.

Godou was soon caught, and a man-eating tiger's jaws closed down upon his left shoulder.

"Ouch! That huuuuuuuurts!"

Godou cried out from the pain. Even though it hurt a lot when he was beaten up by Verethragna yesterday, the feeling was numbed instead due to having few cuts. The current pain felt like the most intense Godou had ever experienced in his life.

But then Godou realized.

The tiger's teeth had dug into the shoulder, biting through flesh, but the bones were —

The bones were strong enough to halt the sharp canines of the man-eating tiger. Had this been his original body, the bones would have been bitten off together along with the shoulder and the arm.

"My body, did it become especially sturdy?"

In the end, he also discovered another fact. It was extremely painful. Still, pain was simply pain. If he summoned his courage, could he not endure?

Besides, what was with this perfect opportunity? Godou used his free right arm to grab the throat of the biting tiger.

Even with monstrous strength, a human could not possibly win a fight against a wild beast.

Completely outclassed in agility and speed. Even a world champion boxer could not hope to win a fistfight against a tiger.

But in a situation where one was being bitten like this, all it took was a reach of the arm.

Guuuuuuh!? The tiger began to groan as if puzzled.

It was only natural. Because its throat was being held by the [Bull]'s mighty strength. And then crushed.

Godou crushed the tiger's throat along with its vertebrae. In that instant, the man-eating tiger's gigantic body scattered into yellow and black particles, collapsing like sand. So that's what artificial lifeforms looked like when they died...

Godou turned to look at the remaining tiger.

He could once again use himself as bait, but he noticed he still had other incarnations he could use. The pain from his body infused Godou with new strength.

The incarnation that could only be used when heavily injured. Ferocious and strong, the mighty [Camel] incarnation!

Immediately, the man-eating tiger pounced.

Godou jumped at the same time. Due to abandoning the [Bull] and taking the [Camel]'s form, the previous monstrous strength was gone. But that was not a problem at all!

With one quick motion from his left leg, his knee slammed hard into the tiger's face.

Its skull and face shattered at the same time, the tiger began to hyperventilate. Immediately it crumbled like sand. This combat sense, destructive kicking ability, and jumping power were all bestowed by the [Camel] incarnation.

"Say, now that you've seen all this, isn't it about time for you to stop—"

Godou tried his utmost to sound friendly.

His face paled, Bianchi cried out "Darkness!" The dark mist surrounding Erica began to move and entangle Godou.

The mist was rather cool and breezy. It actually felt kind of pleasant since Godou's body had heated up from battle.

"...Sorry, looks like it's not working."

Godou spoke gently once again. Trying to speak in such a manner actually took more effort than before.

Bianchi cursed "Bastard!" and threw out some kind of object.

It smelt like sulfur and looked like limestone.

"Guh!?"

For an ordinary human, it was probably an item that would produce tragic results like grenades or dynamite. However, the magically created heat, pressure, and explosion disappeared as soon as it touched Godou.

"Guh... Monster!"

Bianchi finally turned his back to Godou. Once again he took out a piece of that kind of limestone and threw it at the walls of the mansion's garden.

Jumping through the opening created by the explosion, he escaped outside.

"Well, given his boastful words previously, ending things so anticlimactically is rather fitting."

Having released the chain barrier, Erica approached.

She must have decided there was no longer a threat once the spellcaster had left and the mist disappeared.

"What are you going to do, Godou? Insist you're a pacifist and let him off without saying a word?"

"Why do you have to ask me something like that?"

"I can't see that kind of generous expression on your face. Aren't you rather mad?"

Godou nodded at Erica's accurate assessment.

"If treated that way, isn't fighting back perfectly reasonable?"

"Even as a pacifist?"

"Pacifism and non-resistance are not the same. I'm not a saint like Mahatma Gandhi. I'm not someone who can turn the other cheek when my left cheek is struck."

Godou muttered as he stepped outside over the collapsed wall.

Bianchi's mansion was built on a hill overlooking the Cagliari harbor and Golfo degli Angeli. The emerald-green Mediterranean Sea could be seen far out in the distance. Walking downhill from the path before the mansion would reach the Cagliari harbor where Godou had visited a few days earlier.

Bianchi was currently running as quickly as he could along down this path.

He was rather fast. If this continued, he would run directly to the harbor. But Godou became aware of something at this time.

Within his body, there was a voice whispering softly to him.

—Destroy. If my power is used, that thing will be gone in an instant...

A black beast cried out from the depths of his heart. But Godou shook his head. Stop. This must be something like the whispers of the devil.

But then, Erica suddenly clutched her chest and knelt over.

"What's wrong, Erica?"

"M-My chest hurts. It seems like I didn't defend completely against Bianchi's spells. Due to that darkness, my heart almost stopped..."

Seeing the profile of the beautiful girl's face distorted in pain, Godou felt like his heart was exploding. He glared severely at Bianchi's back.

ROOOOOOAAAAAAR. The beast in his heart cried out in turn. Should this be done!?

"Go! Take him out!"

Godou cried out naturally.

In that instant, the ground beneath Bianchi turned a murky pitch black as he ran for his life. A massive beast burst forth from that location and charged!

ROOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAR!!

It was a massive [Boar]. Roughly 20m in length or so.

Its fur was black. Exceptionally ferocious, its face was hideous and could only be described as fearsome. Two long tusks protruded out from the sides of its mouth, as sharp and as wide as massive grand blades.

This was Verethragna's fifth incarnation, the [Boar]'s first summoning.

Godou remembered. This was the monster that rampaged through the harbor the first day he came to Sardinia!

The [Boar] charged ahead at this time. With fearsome speed and momentum, it crashed towards Cagliari's harbor. Bianchi was almost trampled to death but managed to make a desperate jump to the side, burying his face in mud, trembling nonstop at his narrow escape.

Then all sorts of things happened.

First of all, Erica casually stood up as soon as she saw the black monster.

"Hoho. Looks like the authority you usurped from Verethragna can take on many different forms."

That was what she said. Godou had been completely played for a fool.

Furthermore, when he heard the words "that thing will be gone in an instant," "that thing" was not referring to Bianchi but the Cagliari harbor up ahead.

The [Boar] delightfully (from what Godou could tell) rushed at the the harbor it had attacked several days ago as one of Verethragna's avatars that had split from him.

The monster's massive black body pranced about with joy. Charging, crashing, rapidly destroying the buildings and harbor facilities around it.

Godou clutched his head in his arms, furiously yelling out " Idiot! Stop!"

The [Boar] screamed as if displeased with the order.

Even so, it continued to rampage, until it finally stopped after ten minutes or so, retreating into the ground as suddenly as it had appeared. Fortunately, the [Boar] only destroyed uninhabited warehouses and facilities, and casualties were miraculously zero.

Nevertheless, Godou deeply regretted his recklessness.

From this point onwards, who knew how many more times he was going to experience regret like this?

Chapter 2 - On the Island of Storms

Part 1

It was roughly ten in the morning when Godou reached the Cagliari harbor this morning.

A mere five hours had passed. Nevertheless, "god-slayer" Kusanagi Godou's surrounding environment had already undergone dramatic upheaval even before then.

"Gentlemen, I apologize deeply for summoning everyone here on such short notice. We have gathered here for but one purpose, to announce the birth of the seventh god-slayer."

The announcement was being made in a private function room of Cagliari's best high-class restaurant. The current speaker was Erica Blandelli. As everyone's gaze was drawn to the one she pointed to, Godou felt rather uncomfortable.

Three other people were present, all middle aged or elderly men.

Apparently they were the commanders-in-chief of magic associations in the Cagliari region.

"A fortnight ago, two gods had descended upon Sardinia -- the ancient Persian Warlord Verethragna and the Phoenician's god of the sky, Melqart. Of the two, Verethragna was vanquished personally by Kusanagi Godou. Erica Blandelli hereby presents this report, having borne witness to the fact."

Erica explained the result directly, omitting the entire process.

But no one pursued the matter. The three commanders-in-chief had received reports of the "black monster" appearing in the Cagliari harbor and that the summoner was apparently a Japanese youth. As a result, they listened quietly to Erica while casting doubtful and fearful gazes at Godou.

Being stared at, Godou turned his attention to the room.

This was a private function room in a high-class restaurant. Even though there was no chandelier on the ceiling, there shouldn't be a sense of dissonance, right? Godou examined the meticulously crafted chair he was sitting on, concluding that anyone could tell its high-class origins without being an expert.

(I never expected I would one day visit a place like this...)

Godou sighed at the surprising direction his life was taking.

During this time, Erica issued orders as the [King]'s representative.

"Gentlemen, Kusanagi Godou's demands are few in number. His only wishes are for you all to handle the Cagliari harbor incident's aftermath and information control, punish the instigator David Bianchi, and at the same time, provide full support in tracking down King Melqart. That's all."

After the Cagliari harbor commotion, Erica had proposed:

"Given the current state of affairs, it's best to handle the aftermath using the name of the king, announcing to the magi of the world the birth of the seventh Devil King. This will make further action more expedient."

Godou made a few amendments and agreed to the plan after some consideration. After that, Erica began making calls and the current meeting was prepared in one hour.

"Completely understood. Everything shall be done according to the king's wishes."

"The birth of a new king is truly an astounding and joyous occasion. To issue a challenge to the ancient god Melqart before official assumption of the throne, such mettle truly foretells a promising future."

Summoned to this emergency meeting, the association leaders remarked one after another.

They were not entirely convinced the Japanese youth before their eyes was really a god-slayer, but they kept their composure and maintained a solemn expression.

"Oh right, there's one more request. Please do not leak news of his birth and the Sardinia incident to the magical world apart from those in Sicily. This is very important."

This was Godou's amendment to Erica's proposal of " announcing to the magi of the world."

One of the commanders-in-chief nodded.

"That is not a problem... But why?"

"I don't want unnecessary attention because I plan to continue living an ordinary life."

Before Erica could say anything, Godou answered the question himself.

The commanders-in-chief showed incredulous expressions as if they had heard something unexpected, but they quickly recovered. They probably thought that rudeness to the [King] would bring dire consequences. Godou's sense of discomfort deepened.

He felt rather apologetic that he was forcing elders to treat him in this manner.

"If you're going to the island of Sicily, you'll need a plane. Let me make the arrangements."

One of the commanders-in-chief spoke up but Godou refused frantically.

"Ah, there's no need for special preparations. Any kind of transportation is fine. Either plane or ship will do."

Erica glanced out the window and signaled to Godou with her eyes.

The seaside restaurant offered a Mediterranean view outside the window. Erica's expression seemed to be saying "I like ships better."

But as soon as Godou recalled a certain incident, he rejected Erica's suggestion(?).

"But then again, taking a ship should be impossible, right? What with all the chaos in the harbor right now."

Godou slumped his shoulders apologetically due to the monster appearing in the harbor a few hours ago.

If this had happened at a Japanese train station, it would not be surprising for operations to shut down for an entire day. However--

"If you wish to take the sea route, it can be arranged."

"Eh? But setting sail is impossible today, right?"

"Possibly. But if the king wishes, it is a different matter."

"Let us contact ship operators to charter a ship."

"Eh?!"

A plane trip from Sardinia to Sicily would take about an hour or so .

Crossing the same distance overnight, enjoying a comfortable and elegant journey over the sea as embodied by the night ferry concept -- the night cruise progressed as the massive ship and hotel rocked across the sea. After enjoying the distant night scenery of the Mediterranean Sea, Godou was going to return to his single room to sleep--

"I never thought we would really set sail... Just how far can rules be broken?"

Godou secretly muttered to himself.

In the restaurant of the massive ferry, Godou was sitting opposite Erica.

Back at the harbor, his first impression had been "So huge!" The deck had six stories of living quarters and was equipped with restaurants, bar lounges and movie theater rooms.

The massive ferry seemed to have been built to accommodate a hotel.

"Today happens to be the weekend, so the weekend-only ship ride from Sardinia to Sicily's port of Palermo is apparently available."

Erica explained as she brought the appetizer apple cider to her lips.

As a side note, the night's menu included octopus carpaccio, fish soup, botargo pasta and roasted crab. A very marine-centric selection.

"It gives me a slightly guilty conscience to think they prepared this unscheduled route for us expressly."

"It's too late for guilty consciences!"

"Isn't this nice? The ship operators had been troubled over today's commotion, and we come along asking them to set sail, allowing this ship to go out to sea."

Erica smiled as she spoke.

Other than Godou and Erica, there were a few other groups of passengers. Enjoying the Mediterranean night scenery over dinner was quite a unique experience.

Godou could not help but think arranging a ship went rather smoothly.

"As long as it is the request of the Devil King Campione, all the powerful associations of Europe will put forth all effort in fulfilling it. Due to wealth and political power accumulated over hundreds or even a thousand years, plus the assistance of local authorities, this is nothing difficult. I don't think you need to be that thankful."

"Even if it's an unreasonable request..."

"Yes, but they do this only because of the Campiones' power, as well as the existences that only this power can defeat."

"Gods?"

"The so-called Campiones are warriors fighting on humanity's behalf against the [Heretic Gods] who manifest. They possess the rights and privileges of kings, lording over the world as tyrants and devil kings."

In other words, I have to fight Melqart -- Godou looked up at the ceiling.

"I have no idea at all how to fight a god..."

"Just treat it as the real version of your battle this morning. Godou's body should already be prepared for battle."

"Prepared?"

"Think about it, half-baked training isn't going to do you any good in a fight with tigers and bears! Campiones are the same. To you guys, fighting is as instinctual as breathing, otherwise what happened this morning cannot be explained."

"Isn't it more wholesome to think that strength is gained through effort?"

"That only applies to humans, in a limited sense."

Erica's words sliced to the core of the matter.

"In the natural world, humans were never powerful existences. Nevertheless, combat strength could be raised through the use of weapons and the blood and sweat of martial arts training -- but that method is neither wholesome nor natural. 'The strong are born strong' is the very natural and animalistic truth."

That's the way things went?

Faced with Godou's doubtful gaze, Erica said: "If you wish, I can analyze Godou's combat ability even more rationally."

"...Try me."

"First of all, Godou possesses vitality far surpassing humans. Bitten by that kind of magical beast, one would usually die after losing their shoulder and arm, but Godou could fight as if it was normal."

"Ah... It felt like my body is more sturdy than I thought."

After the battle with Bianchi, Erica had given Godou a mysterious pill.

Said to be a magical drug for speeding the recovery of injuries. After Godou took the pill, Erica helped disinfect and bandage the shoulder that had been bitten by the man-eating tiger.

The wounds completely healed after being left alone for a while after treatment. It was truly amazing, this unbelievable power of recovery.

"Godou's bones are now harder than iron, perhaps even stronger than any metal alloy in existence. Rather than dense, it would be better to say your muscle fibers are now so tough as to be impossible to tear. Furthermore, you have an ability even more powerful than adrenalin which instantly stops bleeding and dulls pain."

Erica brought up the conclusions she had observed at her leisure.

"Now that it's mentioned, the shoulder injury I suffered a few months ago seems to have healed."

After the battle in the morning, Godou had tried throwing stones at sea as a result of recalling his shoulder injury.

Godou had lost his prided powerful shoulder to the injury -- that was the original situation. But his stone throws now flew farther and harder than before the injury.

"Even injuries suffered months ago were healed along with the rebirth as a Campione, right? The recent injuries were definitely healed together as a result."

"My body seems so beyond common logic now..."

"Have you noticed? You're currently speaking in Italian."

"Eh? That's strange. When did this start? And why?"

Godou was shocked by Erica's observation. Without knowing it, he had started using Italian as if it were his mother tongue. Now

that he thought about it, the commanders-in-chief earlier had also been speaking in Italian.

"We magi train in a special language sense when we are young, allowing us to acquire all sorts of languages in short time. See, haven't you met people who learn foreign languages easily?"

"That's right, Erica, your Japanese is indeed quite excellent..."

"A mage's education includes courses on training this type of trait. Campiones too, are also imbued with this disposition. It's not particularly flashy, but it turns out to be a rather practical ability."

"....."

"Last but not least, Campiones' greatest weapons are their ' authorities.' Considering what's happened so far, it is likely that Godou has usurped Verethragna's power of the ten incarnations."

The ship had set sail at 7:30pm. Due to the abundance of time, Erica recounted everything she had discovered during the battle that day.

"I can get ten abilities from a god?"

"Most certainly. North America's Devil King, John Pluto-sama, usurped the authority of [Metamorphosis] from the demonic deity Tezcatlipoca, thereby obtaining five different forms."

"It's like that?"

"England's Black Prince Alec possesses the authority of [Black Lightning], which not only allows him to move as fast as lightning, but turn himself into lightning and even use lightning as a weapon ."

"In other words, it's only fitting..."

Looks like Campione authorities were rather flexible.

Godou began to gain a rudimentary understanding of his body.

"Since Godou's authority includes ten abilities, perhaps there will be various strict conditions governing their use."

"That sounds plausible somehow, but not entirely correct... By the way, Erica."

A thought suddenly occurred to Godou, so he brought it up.

"You tricked me that time before I summoned the boar, what was with that 'my chest hurts'!"

"Outrageous. Accusing me of tricking you. You were using your powers rather passively so I decided to give a final push, that's all."

"There was no need to give me a push. Deceiving a comrade is the worst. Do you know how angry and worried I was at the time! ?"

"I never relied on you!"

"Relying or not, it is only natural to be worried!"

"I, Erica Blandelli, would never be caught in a crisis because of a spell of that level. If you are clearly unaware of this fact, please do not call yourself my comrade so easily!"

A crash of thunder suddenly brought an end to this fruitless argument.

Part 2

Earlier during the daylight hours, the Mediterranean sky had been clear and sunny.

Although it was still March, the sunlight felt more like early summer. Even at night, the sky was completely devoid of clouds. Illuminated by the moon and the stars, the sea at night offered a wondrous sight.

Nevertheless, the crash of thunder just now--

Godou felt something strange from the sound of thunder rumbling up in the sky.

He felt turmoil in his heart, and inexplicably, he knew that a formidable foe was drawing near.

His body brimmed with power and felt hot all over. Including his limbs, down to every digit and even each capillary, all parts of his body were infused with power and heat, as if announcing they had adjusted themselves to a battle-ready stance.

"What is going on with this feeling..."

Muttering to himself, Godou noticed something about the thunder just now.

That. Now that was a real enemy indeed. The mage encountered this morning was totally insignificant in the face of a god-slayer.

Completely worthless as an opponent. Even if the enemy was the genius Erica or an ultimate master who surpassed her, it would make no difference. Humans could not offer meaningful resistance against a god-slayer.

A god-slayer's opponent must be a god -- this was absolute.

The instant he realized that, Godou got up from his seat in the restaurant.

Walking outside without a word, he climbed the stairs and arrived at the top deck of the ferry.

Erica soon followed. The two stopped quarreling and walked along the top deck. There were no other people in sight.

Looking up, one could see the sky had filled with dark clouds at some unknown point in time.

For some reason, Godou knew there was a "god" within the clouds. Or at least, a portion of one was inside there. Otherwise, his body would not be reacting so strongly.

Crash! A flash of lightning streaked past, lighting the dark sky blue-white as thunder erupted.

'It's been a while, boy. In a matter of days, you have already started to look a little like a god-slayer.'

The deep, rich male voice descended from the heavens.

"You are Melqart... Right?"

'Of course. To think you would be unable to recognize the voice of the great divine king. How immature."

Cautiously confirming the speaker's name only earned him mockery and derision. Godou shrugged.

It was the first time to converse in this manner. Playing it safe was only natural.

Godou turned towards Erica beside him, hoping she had something to say. However, she shook her head as if saying "you should be the one talking."

Whenever the enemy was a god, it was Kusanagi Godou's domain... Perhaps that was what she thought?

'Very well. Fate must have brought me to witness a brat like you slay Verethragna. Brat, you and I both awakened on the island I used for temporary shelter. Hence, I shall take up the duty of punishing your sin of god-slaying. Brat, any objections?'

"Absolutely! I have no intentions of fighting you."

'How unlike a god-slayer! There is no need for unnecessary concerns, after all, it's simply the next step.'

"The next step!?"

'This sea was once the territory of the people who served me, but look at what it has become. The people here have the insolence to forget the name of Melqart, and are polluting my sacred domain . As the stately divine king, I cannot allow such foolish behavior of the people to persist.'

Every time Melqart spoke, a flash of lightning streaked across the sky. Even though it was only a hunch, [Heretic God] Melqart was probably absent and simply communicating through the lightning. But then again, there was this strange feeling. Puzzling about gods, Godou spoke to the sky.

"By the way, last time you said you were going to submerge the island."

'Hmm, first I shall sink the island where Verethagna met you, brat, and then it will be the island where I am sleeping now. After that, I shall submerge all my ancient territories.'

Melqart declared calmly, causing Godou to tremble in fear.

'I've considered it, I shall execute you, brat, before carrying out divine punishment. But we will not fight here right now. Sinking these islands requires the accumulation of power. I shall end things in one or two days.'

"Did you come all the way here just to tell me this?"

'No truer words. There is still time before the ancient divine king's summons arrive. You may relax for now, and take your time to figure out how to sharpen your sword while you wait. Then I shall send you, brat, on a journey to paradise...'

Journey to paradise? It was at this time that Godou realized, Erica once mentioned Melqart as the god of storms. The current thundercloud should be due to his authority, which meant--

"If you wish, go on and cause a storm in this sky and over the sea!"

If that happened, neither ships nor planes could leave the island .

People would lose all means of escape to find sanctuary. Godou suddenly thought, if storms were summoned right at this moment, all the people on the ship would meet a watery grave...

'Hmph, it looks like you have noticed it, brat. Very well, I shall look forward to the amusement you will offer as a warrior. Well then, wait patiently for your punishment!'

The surrounding sky reverberated with divine king Melqart's hearty laughter.

The thunder and lightning swiftly vanished and the night sky instantly became clear once more.

Hoo... Godou exhaled deeply. Though the conversation with Melqart was short, it was rather taxing mentally. The ancient divine king of the Phoenicians. Even fragments of his voice were enough to cause serious pressure.

Godou originally planned on returning to his room to sleep.

"I don't know what to do yet, but let's replenish my energy first. Now back to the restaurant. This time I will enjoy my dinner properly."

"...Wow, you seem pretty well-adjusted to the current situation."

Erica exclaimed, causing Godou to feel a bit displeased.

Adjusting had nothing to do with it.

After that, Godou and Erica returned to their own rooms for the night. Morning arrived the next day.

Around 9am or so, they once again returned to the top deck.

The sky was bright and sunny, allowing a clear view of the morning Mediterranean Sea. The marine-blue sea and white waves glistened beneath the bright sunlight, and even a harbor was coming into view!

The ship's destination was the port city of Palermo on the island of Sicily.

Sicily was the largest island in the Mediterranean. Like Sardinia, it was an autonomous region of Italy and a major producer of wine and olive oil. Also a major exporter of fresh fish and gelato[8]; advertisements for these kinds of goods could be seen everywhere.

Palermo was a city that acted as the gateway to Sicily.

Historically, it had been the ancient capital famed for its harbor on the northwest part of Sicily. Once the capital of the Kingdom of Sicily, it was now the capital of the autonomous region of Sicily.

"Hey, where are we going once we arrive?"

Godou asked Erica who still seemed sleepy.

Glamorous on all other occasions, mornings were the only times when she seemed a little slow. It was quite amusing indeed.

"First let's make a visit to the Palermo magic association, [Panormus]. This is the largest association on the island of Sicily. We have already contacted them yesterday through the commanders-in-chief we met at Cagliari. Palermo is also a city with intimate ties to the ancient Phoenicians."

"Like Cagliari, could it be a city built by the ancient Phoenicians as well?"

"Yes, that's right. Though the rulers have changed hands many times, its Phoenician origin remains historical fact. Since Sicily is the territory Melqart is most concerned about, let's start our operations with Palermo as our base."

Saying that, Erica's face recovered her usual domineering airs.

"Once we reach the harbor, members of [Panormus] should be there to welcome us."

"Having people to receive us would really be a great help."

At this time, a silver-haired elderly man approached.

Godou was reminded of the famous movie, "The Godfather." Set in America during 1920s, it told the story of bloody struggles between violent gangs of Italian immigrants.

The old man gave off an aura that clearly belonged to no respectable man.

He was wearing what seemed to be a high-class suit. The cigar in his right hand also looked very high class. There was a unified sense of solemnity and criminality. Come to think of it, the mafia apparently operated on the island of Sicily... Just as these thoughts crossed Godou's mind, the man had already arrived.

"Uncle Zamparini, were you traveling on this ship too?"

"Ah yes. I remember we only met once, but what a great memory you have. Paolo Blandelli's niece is indeed as clever as rumored."

He appeared to be an acquaintance of Erica's. But Old Man Zamparini's gaze soon shifted away from her.

"My name is Walter Zamparini. Perhaps you may have heard of my name as the commander-in-chief of [Panormus]. We of [Panormus] are honored to welcome the youngest king. We humbly pledge our lives at your command."

"Eh? But how did you get here? The ship hasn't even reached the harbor yet."

"A trivial matter, it's actually very simple. After receiving news from Cagliari that Your Highness was coming to Sicily, I first took a plane to Cagliari and then boarded this ship."

It only took an hour's flight from Palermo to Cagliari, so it was entirely plausible. However, why did the old man have to do that?

"Thanks to that, I was able to witness Your Highness and Melqart in a conversation between a devil king and a god. I, Zamparini, am willing to lay down this life in service to Your Highness -- Kusanagi Godou."

I see. Godou figured it out.

Old Man Zamparini had boarded the same ship for the purpose of observing Godou. In order to discern with his own two eyes whether Godou was a god-slayer and whether he could duel a god or not. Having witnessed the events last night, he had confirmed that Godou was a real god-slayer...

"There is no need to go that far for my sake. As long as you help handle Melqart's aftermath, I'll be really grateful."

"Not at all. It is a mage's duty to serve a Campione. Please accept our assistance as much as possible... Ah, and Blandelli."

Old Man Zamparini suddenly called to Erica by her family name.

"Thank you for your efforts in serving the young king till now. However, your legal guardian, the [Copper Black Cross]' commander-in-chief Paolo Blandelli, has issued an order for your return. I shall serve in your place from this point onward, so please drop everything and hurry back to Milan."

This announcement struck Godou and Erica like a bolt from the blue.

Part 3

Thirty minutes or so after meeting Old Man Zamparini, the ship reached the harbor of Palermo.

Following the old man who looked and dressed exactly like a mafia boss, Godou and Erica got off the ship.

"Automobiles have already been prepared. There, that one."

Gazing into the distance at the harbor, one could see two BMWs in front of Zamparini.

Gazing at the sturdy-looking exteriors of the luxury vehicles, Godou thought to himself. That's definitely bullet-proof glass in case of a shootout, right...

One of the cars was white while the other was black. Either way you look at it, they did not seem like cars which normal people would ride.

"The [King] and I shall ride this one. Blandelli, the other one will take you to the airport."

Zamparini made his way towards the black BMW.

Both cars had chauffeurs who were wearing sloppy looking clothes. They did not look like "professionals" but these men did have sharp glares...

Before Godou could object to the old man's orders, Erica had already lit the powder keg.

"I'm sorry, but I cannot return to Uncle Paolo yet."

"Such willfulness. Your legal guardian has already requested that you, a minor and a girl, be sent home. Besides, the organization you belong to has also issued orders for your return. Hence, Blandelli, you have no options left."

Igniting the cigar on one end and placing the other end in his mouth, the old man spoke. Even though he looked very solemn as he puffed out blue smoke, Godou still felt compelled to speak.

"Excuse me, Zamparini-san. Although Erica really should return , I will be very troubled if she's no longer here. At least let her accompany me until the duel with Melqart. It would be a great help to me."

"I understand. Though Your Highness may be king, you are still young and inexperienced as a god-slayer."

Exhaling blue smoke, Zamparini said.

"I admit a capable person is needed to fill that role, but there's no reason it has to be Erica Blandelli, right?"

"Eh?"

"There is no need for a young girl like her to serve Your Highness who is about to duel a god... Though you may feel I am putting this cruelly, it is a risky and difficult mission after all."

Risky? Godou realized his stupidity. Indeed, bringing Erica along would mean getting her involved with a dangerous god.

However, he still had great need of Erica's support--

"Hence, allow me to take over the role of serving the king as Erica Blandelli's substitute."

"Eh? What are you talking about?"

Hearing something unexpected made Godou pose a stupid question.

"I, Zamparini, shall support you during battle. Hohoho, despite how I may look, I did survive many dangerous situations in my youth... So please, let me offer my utmost efforts."

Zamparini's words were full of confidence.

Godou imagined a scene with Zamparini dressed in a white suit , wearing a Borsalino hat, his neck wrapped in a stylish muffler, puffing away on a cigar, holding a machine-gun in one hand and dynamite in the other--

Perhaps the truth might be unexpectedly close to his imagination.

In actual fact, he could sense that the old man was far stronger than Erica. However.

"No, even someone like you, Uncle Zamparini, cannot replace me. Fighting beside Kusanagi Godou and advising him is my job, Erica Blandelli's."

Erica made a "partners" declaration.

That's right, no matter how dangerous the situation, the only one who stood by his side in the face of gods was Erica. Due to her declaration, Godou realized once again.

Just as Godou was about to request for Erica to stay -- at that very moment.

"Let's put it this way, it is because I am already Kusanagi Godou's 'woman'... We are lovers. Capable as you are, Uncle Zamparini, you cannot pursue a romantic relationship with him, right? So please give up."

What? Godou suddenly heard words he never expected.

In any case, the issue of Erica's return was thus cast aside for now.

Godou and the rest rode Zamparini's car and traveled across the city of Palermo. Even though Godou and Erica had the rear seats all to themselves, Erica stuck to Godou the whole time like lovers. Sometimes she would lean over, while on other occasions she embraced him, her body tightly pressed against him the whole time.

Godou felt really dizzy.

Though Palermo was an Italian city, it was heavily influenced by Islamic culture. Consequently, virtually all buildings in the streets had no windows visible.

Godou was concerned about Erica's lie, but the sensation of her body tightly pressed against him felt really unsettling.

That soft, supple skin of hers, gave off a sweet fragrance akin to perfume, making him feel warm and comfortable. The sensations of the beautiful young blonde sent Godou's mind into a daze.

"Hmm, Blandelli... In other words, you and Kusanagi Godou are engaged in a relationship as a couple?"

"Yes, exactly, Uncle Zamparini. So please don't do anything so inconsiderate as to try to separate us. It would certainly taint the name of Walter Zamparini, once renowned as the Hero of Sicily."

"Well since it's been spelled out to this extent, my hands are tied ..."

Sitting on the passenger seat beside the driver, Zamparini conversed with Erica as she sat beside Godou.

"I guess it can't be helped. As an elder of an association, I really should do as your uncle, Paolo Blandelli, requested. But as a man, I can't stubbornly refuse to think outside the box. Very well then, I will make things convenient for you and the young [King]."

"Wow, I'm really grateful! Come, Godou, you thank him as well ."

"A-Ah yes, I-I'm really thankful."

Erica suddenly dragged him into the conversation, causing Godou to offer his thanks frantically.

"Not at all. As long as you're a man, who wouldn't want to enjoy themselves once or twice?"

Zamparini's words made Godou freeze.

If a guy like him could really become lovers with a beauty like Erica, it would certainly be worthy of celebration.

"And Kusanagi Godou, it is rather good news to us magi that Your Highness holds a healthy interest in beautiful girls. After all, the current Devil Kings are all rather rigid in their thinking, with nothing to do with the pleasures of life."

Just as Godou was surprised by this sudden topic, the car stopped in front of a seaside park.

"Hmm... Let us take a break here for now."

At Zamparini's orders, the car stopped. Presumably to dispel the awkward atmosphere.

Given this unexpected free time, Erica and Godou took a walk in the park, holding hands.

"What do you mean by this!?"

"I couldn't help it. There was no other choice."

The two whispered to each other as they watched the sea, hand in hand. Zamparini and his subordinates kept away tactfully, allowing them privacy to speak their mind.

"Listen Godou, I will now explain in order. First, Zamparini holds you in high regard, probably because he eavesdropped on your conversation with Melqart."

"Really? But I didn't really say much that time."

"Are you stupid? Simply talking to a [Heretic God] as equals is already an accomplishment. Furthermore, you are a completely neutral king in the world of magic, with neither supporters, subordinates nor backing. Zamparini wishes to establish amicable ties with you right now."

"I don't really mind if all he wants are amicable ties..."

"If that's all he wants, fine. But supposing Zamparini wishes to become an adviser akin to being the 'right hand man' of the seventh Devil King, then it's not hard to understand. At least, I believe he is aiming for the lofty power and influence held by kings."

Other than the fact that she was holding Godou's hand as she leaned against him, Erica acted identically as before.

"Hence, Erica Blandelli by your side is an obtrusive existence to him, which is why he preemptively contacted the [Copper Black Cross] beforehand."

"But what does becoming the 'right hand man' have to do with sending you back?"

"You finally noticed the key point. Hmm, that's the issue."

Erica seemed to have reached a conclusion, as she murmured towards empty space.

"Although [Panormus] is the largest association on the island of Sicily, it only counts as mid to small scale on the entire European stage. But if [Panormus] obtains a Campione's protection, or even becomes his direct subordinate organization, then it can stand toe to toe with bigger and more prestigious associations."

"....."

"On the other hand, prestigious associations, like the [Copper Black Cross] which I belong to, will avoid developing intimate ties with individual [Kings] as much as possible. Of course, they will still offer their services with the greatest reverence, but they will not approve of acts such as having their commander-in-chief's niece and future commander-in-chief candidate become an immature Devil King's 'right hand man.' "

"So why do you have to call yourself my 'lover?' "

Godou exclaimed emphatically, for there must be other ways, right?

"T-This couldn't be helped either. Apart from using the name of an association's mage, supporting you on a personal basis would be most ideal. Once a Campione declares 'I will not permit my woman to be taken away,' no one will dare drive me away."

Indeed, as soon as she made the lovers declaration, Zamparini became understanding and accommodating.

As befitted the passionate Latin nation, perhaps they were more lenient when it came to matters of love. However, Godou was a bona fide member of the Yamato nation!

"Wouldn't it work if you said we are good friends?"

"Idiot, that would only work to Zamparini's advantage!"

As their argument escalated as they leaned their bodies close together, their voices grew louder and louder.

"...Besides, I believe that a declaration of lovers would better protect my safety."

"Why is that?"

"You must have felt it to some extent. Zamparini and his [Panormus] association are not just a real magic association, but also authentic Sicilian mafia."

"He really is a Godfather!?"

"If he deemed me serving by Godou's side to be a hindrance, ordering an assassination would just be everyday business for them. Particularly during a battle with Melqart, a bullet to the back followed by a cover up would not be surprising."

"What a bunch of people..."

"If you have the leisure to panic, why don't you put some effort into looking more passionate..."

Erica finally concluded.

"That is why I called myself your lover. As the girl upon whom the Campione bestows his full affections, I will be safe from their foolhardy attempts. Consequently, please treat me as your most beloved woman, understood?"

And thus the secret conversation ended.

The pair tried their best to look like "lovers" as they walked back to the car.

Thereafter, Zamparini took them sightseeing to various attractions.

Ancient Greeks, the Roman Empire, Arabs, Normans and various tribes had conquered Palermo in the past. Its history carried a certain exotic flair that distinguished the city from many others. Along the old city streets along the shore, there were many ancient buildings.

Churches and chapels flashed into view. Then they were taken to the Palazzo dei Normanni -- a palace that was constructed by Arabs in the ninth century then later rebuilt as the Norman king's residence in the twelfth century.

"Very well, time to go."

It was 5pm when Zamparini declared in the car. Exhausted from all the sightseeing, Godou asked lifelessly:

"...Where are we going this time?"

"To my home, Kusanagi Godou. It's about time for Your Highness to rest. Tonight, please accept my invitation to be a guest at my home."

Godou was shocked. Going around acting like lovers with Erica all day had completely drained him and he wished to have a good rest in a room by himself...

Soon after, they arrived at Zamparini's home located in a high-class residential neighborhood within the city of Palermo.

Numerous servants were hard at work in this spacious and luxurious mansion. All over the premises were people who appeared rather disreputable. They were most likely mafia as well as magi belonging to the [Panormus] magic association.

Godou and Erica were taken to the most grand and luxurious room in the house. That in itself was certainly nice, but Godou's problem was that he was not the only one sleeping there.

With a matter-of-fact tone of voice, Erica informed Godou they will be sleeping in the same room.

Part 4

Night had fallen and dinner time had arrived. But the only occupants of the stately and magnificent dining room were the master Zamparini, Godou and Erica. Three people.

It was not yet time to start eating, but the table was already piled full of high-class dishes and sumptuous offerings.

Due to Erica's public declaration of a "lovers' relationship," Godou could only eat mechanically despite facing the most luxurious feast he encountered to this date. Thanks to that, Godou completely failed to register what he ate or what anything tasted like.

Then Godou was taken to the bedroom.

Naturally, Erica accompanied him. Willing or not, they could not tear their gazes away from the massive canopy bed. Obviously, there was no other bed either.

"I-I'm gonna sleep on the couch over there."

"T-That's right. Even if I declared ourselves to be lovers, there is no need to go so far."

Just as they reached consensus, the telephone in the room started to ring.

"This happens to be one of my hobbies."

A massive bath was located in a corner of Zamparini's home. Thus declared Godou and Erica's host and master of the house, with great pride over the phone.

"Often I feel that modern Europeans over neglect the customs of the bath... Hence, I decided to have craftsmen recreate an ancient Roman bath right here."

Mesmerized by the sight of the bathing facilities, Godou answered with a simple "Huh."

Inside were three massive bathing areas, each wider than any swimming pool Godou had ever seen. Two were filled with hot water while the third was cold. The place was filled with giant columns like the Parthenon temple in Greece, giving a serene sense of solemnity.

Naturally, the facilities were also equipped with sauna rooms and a smaller Jacuzzi tub. Indeed, this massive bathing facility did feel like Roman baths from the times at the height of their popularity.

"It must have been fate that allowed me the chance to entertain the young king and his lover. Surely, Your Highness and your lover over there should take the time to enjoy yourselves here."

" "Eh?" "

Zamparini's sudden proposal left Godou and Erica dumbfounded.

"Hoho, it's only natural for two young lovers to indulge themselves in pleasure at a place like this. I apologize for my boldness, but I have taken upon myself to make preparations for the two of you. --Come."

The old man smiled knowingly and clapped his hands to summon.

With the sound of voices asking "Are you calling us, Master?" coming from inside, ten-odd women emerged. Godou was stunned by their appearance.

All the women were merely clad in sheer fabric. The level of skin exposure was virtually equivalent to full nudity.

Amongst the young women were Caucasians, Negros, as well as girls of oriental descent. Every girl was outstanding in face and figure. All were young beauties without exception.

"These are my maids. They are here to serve your every command."

"N-N-No such thing! This is not my cup of tea, spare me please! I-I-I'm going to the ordinary bathroom--"

"Well, Uncle Zamparini, thank you very much for your kind offer."

As Godou refused on reflex, Erica restrained him with a look from her eyes and proceeded to express thanks.

"Fufufu, isn't this marvelous, Godou? Don't be shy, you should properly accept Uncle Zamparini's generosity at a time like this."

Erica leaned herself against Godou as if on purpose.

Seeing this amusing scene, Zamparini respectfully took a bow and exited the bathing facility.

"Young master and mistress, please come over here."

A couple of highly exposed maids approached.

Do I have to get naked right now? Just as Godou stood stunned -- Erica immediately stepped forward between them.

"Hoho, wait a second. I have no intention of robbing you of your job, but the privilege of undressing him belongs to no one but me alone. Excuse me, but please give us some private time alone for now."

Then she gently and elegantly led Godou away by the hand.

Undress? His mind in a state of suspension, Godou was thus pulled towards the changing room.

Along the way, Erica released Godou's hand.

"What's going on?"

"Quiet. Those maids are here to investigate. They must have been sent on Zamparini's commands to verify if we are lovers or not."

Erica spoke softly and Godou whispered back.

(Investigate?)

(He is probably suspicious about our relationship. Think about it, Zamparini must have been observing us since last night.)

(Now that you mentioned it, we were having an argument... Damn it, what should we do now?)

What could we do now to resemble lovers even more? Hating himself for knowing nothing of romance, Godou racked his brains to no avail.

(No other way, Godou, we must prepare ourselves.)

(Prepare ourselves?)

(Ah yes, even though I said "give us some private time alone for now," the maids will run after us immediately and Zamparini's

doubt would only increase. We must switch over to offense starting now.)

Erica declared like a knight with decisive valor.

I see, I get it now. Godou nodded. In the world of duels, running away from risk would only lead to greater danger.

(I got it. So what should I do specifically?)

(W-Well then -- first undress, both of us need to take off all our clothes, and then walk out there in front of those girls.)

Her earlier valor seemingly a lie, Erica's face had gone all red.

"Eh?" asked Godou foolishly.

(T-This is the plan for breaking out of our predicament, and it's the only plan! So Godou, you must suppress your lustful thoughts and focus on carrying out the plan. Swear that you will erase from your memory everything you see starting this moment! Swear you'll forget it all, do you understand!?)

Returning from the changing room, Godou was wearing nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist.

Likewise, Erica was naked aside from the large bath towel she used to cover everything from her hips up to her bust.

"Let me help you wash."

Just like before, several girls stepped forward.

"Sure... But limit your efforts to washing me alone."

Erica replied elegantly to the beautiful girl who appeared to be the maids' representative.

"What about the young master?"

"Hoho, perhaps he does want to be washed by you girls... Hohoho, nevertheless, I will be driven mad by jealousy if I see him touched by any woman apart from myself. Perhaps I might even be driven to murder him and the women around him."

"Fufu, that would be terrible, wouldn't it? I understand."

Erica's mischievous expression and tone of voice stood in stark contrast to her dangerous declaration.

Smiling in response, the maid representative gestured to the others with her eyes. Thereafter, the highly stimulating girls, clad in sheer fabric, distanced themselves from Godou.

Godou recalled Erica's instructions.

'Act casual. If you panic and lose composure, it won't work!'

Consequently, Godou had no choice but to desperately pretend to act natural.

Like some sort of incantation, he repeatedly chanted "mind over body, mind over body" to himself.

As the maids laid their hands on Erica's bath towel, the piece of cloth was taken away to reveal a young maiden's magnificent nude body, the most alluring and seductive that Godou had ever known.

Then Godou saw.

Appearing before Godou like a queen surrounded by maids, Erica's body was as bare as the day she was born. Godou already knew her figure was outstanding, but that notion was simply too naive. She was more beautiful than he could ever imagine.

Her gracefully shaped breasts, voluminous yet perky, did not show any impression of sagging.

On the other hand, those rosy flower buds, on the front of her breasts, exuded such purity and loveliness.

Her waist was extremely taut and without the slightest fat. Furthermore, that round voluptuous body part below the waist traced out a most wondrous curve--

In addition, Erica's pale complexion was unparalleled. Immersed in the steam of the bath, her alabaster skin showed a tint of redness against its pristine paleness. The mere sight of her skin was enough to deal a devastating blow to Godou's rational sense of mind.

"Hoho, Godou is so... You've clearly seen me so many times and yet you still gaze upon me with such crazed and intense eyes. This passion of yours is what I find truly adorable."

Erica spoke, smiling as she endured Godou's gaze. Crap, I forgot all about Erica's earlier instructions to "Watch me as if you were admiring a familiar work of art."

Godou concurred with Erica's words and said:

"T-That's only because you are so full of charm."

Godou recited the line that was prepared beforehand.

Due to Erica's strict orders of "Speak as little as possible to avoid blowing our cover," Godou immediately kept his mouth shut.

During this time, the maids poured water over Erica's body. Instead of using a shower head, they carried water directly using wooden buckets.

After being washed, that perfect skin of hers seemed even smoother than before.

As if trying not to harm a beautiful yet fragile work of art, the maids washed cautiously with reverent motion.

Guided by the maids, Erica, with her beautiful silky skin, entered the hot water bath. Like a mistress of the house enjoying her exclusive bath, she stretched her legs out with an air of satisfaction.

The bath was filled with floating flowers of red camellia that the maids poured into the bathwater along with scented oil. This filled the entire bathing facility with a rich sense of fragrance.

"Godou, when are you going to stop staring at me? Lacking patience is one of your shortcomings. Please hurry over then."

"Ah, uh yeah."

At Erica's behest, Godou responded immediately and stood up to enter the bath, wading over to beside Erica.

Erica leaned her back against Godou's chest. The blonde female knight was not only a master of the sword but also the owner of a magnificent body with a slender figure and skin that felt as soft and smooth as silk. Godou now entered a posture of embracing Erica.

--Hmm, my entire body feels so hot, it must be due to the hot water.

--Hmm, I feel kind of like I'm drunk. This too, must be due to the hot water.

"Really... Are you still peeping at me? Godou sure is a bad boy, or is it because I am too attractive..."

Under the hot water, Erica turned herself around, coming face to face with Godou.

Of course, Godou maintained his posture of embrace. Feeling Erica's bouncy bosom pressed against him, Godou could not help but scream "Mind over body!" over and over to himself.

But Erica continued to press the offense.

She lightly kissed Godou everywhere across his face, chin and neck except for his lips, then stared at him with eyes of craving.

Godou could feel his sanity flying away to the heavens, but he desperately held on. In the predetermined manner they had agreed on earlier, Godou stared at the maids and began whispering with Erica.

As the mastermind of the farce, the beautiful maiden went "Ah, I see" and smiled.

Like a princess accustomed to issuing orders, Erica proceeded to turn her gaze to the maid representative.

"Isn't it about time for you all to be dismissed?"

"May we?"

"He tells me he feels self-conscious in front of other women, so leave us alone for now, we... will 'enjoy' ourselves a bit, understood?"

"Understood. Very well then, we shall be dismissed."

The maid representative immediately smiled and bowed her head reverently.

With great swiftness the maids all made an exit. Most likely, they did not fail to understand the behavior Erica meant by the word "enjoy."

Of course, all this was achieved without any merit on Godou's part. It was clearly such an embarrassing situation and yet Erica's acting was so natural and convincing. Godou once again recognized Erica's skill in performing on the public stage.

Even though the maids had left, the two of them remained in tight embrace.

Several minutes later, Erica slowly chanted spell words softly to use investigative magic.

"How are things?"

"There's no one around the bath, and no one hiding in here using magic either."

Having confirmed it was safe, they both exhaled deeply out of relief.

Erica immediately separated herself from Godou's body and distanced herself away from him. Soaked in the water for so long, both of them were almost about to faint.

That night, Godou and Erica spent the night in one bedroom.

Furthermore, they were sleeping in such outrageous conditions -- on the same bed under the same blanket.

Hearing from Erica that the bedroom was free of investigative magic she had used in the bath, as well as non-mechanical but

magical means of voyeurism and eavesdropping, Godou originally intended to sleep alone on the couch. However...

"How can we sleep separately while we are under suspicions? There are servants outside the room. If we sleep apart, our cover will be blown immediately!"

Erica snarled angrily. Indeed, it would be most unnatural for a pair of lovers who had displayed such passion in the bath to sleep separately.

Thus the two of them marked an "invisible boundary line" across the spacious bed.

Having established a treaty of absolute inviolable territory, the two of them laid themselves on the same bed under the same blanket, becoming bedfellows. Godou slept on the left side while Erica slept on the right.

In order to avoid trespassing into Erica's territory, Godou slept with his back towards her. Likewise, Erica slept in the same posture, both of them keeping their distance with their backs towards each other.

In any case, let's sleep first. Fall asleep quickly. Trying to dispel unnecessary thoughts of temptation, Godou kept his eyes tightly shut, desperately summoning the arrival of sleep. Suddenly, he heard sounds of sobbing.

With great surprise, Godou found himself hearing extremely quiet sobbing noises.

"...Erica, are you crying?"

"...I-Impossible, I'm just a little sad over my loss of purity, that's all."

Erica whispered in a domineering yet exhausted voice.

"W-What loss of purity, in actual fact, we didn't really do anything..."

"You're such an idiot! For me, my completely naked body was seen by you. Acts that no virgin should engage in have taken place , and even now, I am sharing a bed with you -- furthermore, the things we've done are known to many others."

"K-Known to many others?"

"The Campione and his lover who happens to be the daughter of the prestigious Blandelli family. In our world, this is sensational news whether politically or as gossip. Very soon, it will propagate everywhere."

"Is that how it works..."

"Anyone who hears of such rumors will never believe me to have remained untainted in body. Apart from myself, no one will think I am a pure virgin."

Sobbing noises. Faint sobbing was heard once more.

"Anyway, it's okay, I have no regrets."

"Really?"

"Certainly. I, Erica Blandelli, will never ever do anything I regret afterwards, absolutely never. Please do not misunderstand, I did this for other reasons and not because I liked Godou."

Godou fell silent. The fact that he did misunderstand for an instant must be kept secret.

"Listen carefully, this was simply assistance offered by the heroic knight who pitied and took mercy on the man who suddenly became king. Doing things to such an extent was simply part of my perfectionism, make no mistake about that."

"I see... Thank you, Erica, it is impossible for me to properly express my gratitude to you."

This was a time when proper thanks were necessary.

Thinking that, Godou suddenly spoke up. His back having crossed the boundary, he could feel Erica squirming awkwardly, most likely due to embarrassment.

"N-Not at all. If you and I had never met, the current situation would never have happened, so pay it no mind."

"But I mind. Yes, about the matter of your purity."

Feeling embarrassed, Godou asked:

"If you don't mind, I-I really have to take responsibility, right?"

"Idiot, there's no need to take responsibility. After all, I did everything under my own will. But you have to keep your promise and forget everything that happened in the bath, got that!?"

Due to sleeping in the same bed, the two of them continued to chat throughout the night for a very long time.

Even though he was utterly drained in mind and body, Godou could not close his eyes, unable to sleep because he was overly conscious of the person sleeping beside him.

The next morning, Godou immediately got up and looked out the window as soon as he woke up.

Heavy rain poured down, accompanied by strong gusts of wind and occasional roars of thunder. Truly, a storm was coming.

From the rumbles of thunder, Godou heard a voice.

'--Long you have waited, god-slayer! Come! In the real battle, I shall demonstrate clearly to you with lightning the ancient king's magnificence as the hunter of dragons. Head east, and I shall await you in the ruins of the eastern decayed city!'

As the raging winds and roars of thunder passed on this message, this was a voice which Godou alone could hear, because the divine king Melqart recognized no one but Godou.

"...Could this be Melqart?"

"Yeah, he's calling me."

Erica asked from bed with a sleepy voice and Godou answered.

Not even seven in the morning, this was far earlier than Erica's usual time to rise given her morning feebleness. Nevertheless, the roars of the violent wind together with the divine presence filling the atmosphere must have woken her up.

"Finally time for a proper battle... Right."

"What?"

"Nothing major. Just as I thought, it's better to wear less while I sleep, or else it feels too stuffy..."

"What is with you girl, how do you sleep normally?"

Without leaving the room, Erica began to change into lighter sleepwear. Due to Erica's strange behavior in her sleepy state, Godou continued to stare outside the window.

"Melqart said he's waiting for me in the ruins of the decayed city to the east. Where on earth is that?"

"Probably Soluntum, seventeen kilometers east of Palermo. It was once a front line outpost of the ancient Phoenicians and now a district of ruins..."

Hearing the approximate location described by the divine king, Erica whispered softly.

"Go ask Zamparini to send out [Panormus] magi to scout it out. Once the [Heretic God]'s presence is detected, start moving out in that direction."

Hearing the answer of his "partner," back to her usual reliable form, Godou nodded.

Part 5

"An image is appearing in my mind... A weapon of light."

Godou answered in the car en route to Soluntum.

Sitting beside him, Erica had asked "Try imagining what power would be effective in a battle against Melqart the god of storms?"

Godou had pondered for a while but came up with nothing.

After further contemplation, he still had no idea.

This was only natural. A week ago, Godou was just an ordinary person completely uninvolved with the world of magic and gods. After three minutes of thought, Godou gave up, certain in the futility of further thought.

Then suddenly, inspiration struck his mind.

"Hmm, I get the feeling I need to use a bright and shiny weapon ."

"Could your hint get any more ambiguous..."

Godou shrugged at Erica's sarcasm.

"As expected, in a fight against a [Heretic God], all one can do is make a proper entrance to the stage."

Zamparini spoke from the driver's seat.

He was driving the white BMW. Due to the storm, they were taking an eastbound national route which had lower traffic.

--Three hours after Godou got out of bed, a massive spiritual presence was confirmed near the Soluntum Archaeological Park, just as Erica predicted.

After receiving the report, Erica had said:

"We are going to battle Melqart now, please lend us a car and driver."

"No problem, it will be ready right away."

After hearing Zamparini's polite reply, Godou and Erica headed to the entrance of the mansion. The old man, both Sicilian mafia boss and magic association commander-in-chief, made his reappearance driving the white BMW.

"Hoho, excuse me for saying so, but I'm quite confident in my skills."

Godou listened to Zamparini's boast with an annoyed expression as he sat in the rear seat.

As a side note, there was a black attache case on the passenger seat next to the driver.

"...Can I look at what's inside?"

With an ominous premonition, Godou opened the case to confirm.

Inside was a sleek black submachine gun. The Thompson M1921, commonly known as the "Tommy Gun." Even for someone unfamiliar with firearms, Godou recognized it as one of the world's earliest submachine guns, and one that had been favored by assassins in the movie "The Godfather."

Furthermore, it was fully ready to fire, with a drum magazine attached to the gunbarrel...

"Uncle Zamparini is active as a mage in various militant factions across Europe and America. While I use swords to manipulate ' iron,' Uncle uses guns and ammunition to manipulate 'flames,' you see."

"So... So that's why I had that kind of feeling."

Godou nodded at Erica's explanation.

The trip from Palermo to the Soluntum ruins required roughly thirty minutes.

Soluntum was a town constructed in the fourth century BCE by the Phoenicians in the mountains along the shore. It fell into

decline after coming under Greek and Roman rule, and was eventually destroyed by Islamic Arabs. In modern times, the site was being run as the Soluntum Archaeological Park and Museum.

Thanks to Zamparini's preparations, the park and the museum were immediately shut down as part of emergency measures.

But under such weather conditions of roaring wind and torrential rain along with lightning descending from dark clouds, it was unlikely there would be any visitors to the museum anyway .

Nevertheless, Godou was gratified to know that park staff were helping with evacuating visitors.

"Godou, I will leave for a moment to remain on standby somewhere else. Leave the role of support to me."

Getting off the BMW, Erica yelled out over the roars of the wind .

"Okay! I am relying on you!"

Before Zamparini could get a word in, Godou swiftly gave his permission.

Godou recalled Erica mentioning the night before that "Fighting together in one place will pose certain difficulties..." Although it could be unnecessary worry, it was better to be safe than sorry.

"Hold onto this, it might come in handy."

Godou held out his hand to receive the object Erica gave to him.

The object was a lion-shaped ornament that felt quite heavy despite being palm-sized. After putting it away carefully, Godou entered the archaeological park together with Old Man Zamparini.

Umbrellas were pointless in such weather since they would be instantly blown away.

Whether Godou, Zamparini, or Erica who had just taken off, all of them were wearing raincoats. But to little effect, for Godou found his lower torso almost completely drenched.

Feeling that the hood obscured his vision too much, Godou simply took it off instead.

The strong wind, heavy rain, loud thunder and various noises made it impossible to speak to each other. Without saying a word, Godou and Zamparini made their way towards the interior of the park silently.

Then Godou felt his entire body filling with power.

It had happened before back when he heard Melqart's "voice" on the ship. This was power surging forth for the sake of battle. In order to fight a god, this power was produced instinctively by a god-slayer. The five senses of the body as well as a sixth sense, down to his fingertips and every capillary, all were filled with heat and power.

After that, Godou finally arrived at the deepest part of the ruins.

This was a little hill on the seaside, with two columns erected like deer or goat horns. Other than these upright columns, there were no other structures.

However, this lack of structures was not due to the ravages of time.

Even eons ago in the distant past, only two columns existed here.

As taught by Erica previously, Godou knew these two columns were the symbols of the Phoenician sky god Melqart. Then Godou felt it -- his presence!

Melqart was located directly above the two columns!

Manifesting tangibly as violent winds, fierce rain, and scorching lightning and thunder in the air, the sky god Melqart was making his appearance in the form of the storm.

'Huhahaha! We finally meet again, young god-slayer!'

"On the contrary, I am not only a civilized person but also a pacifist. Even if my opponent is a prestigious god, I have no wish to accept a dangerous fight."

'What god-slayer is this, to make such a weak statement? No matter, whether a brat like you agrees to fight or not, there is no problem. To me, it is entirely irrelevant. But are you sure? There are only six days left, eh?'

"Six days? What do you mean?"

"Kuku... In order to better smash this land, I will first drench it with a storm, then sink the city at dusk on the sixth day.'

"What!?"

'At dusk on the sixth day, I shall sink the city that sits upon this land that once belonged to me. That is what I am talking about. And on the first day... Today will be this place."

An unbelievable conversation was taking place amidst the rumble of thunder from the sky, and its subject was rather shocking.

This place -- these ruins of Soluntum? Discovering this fact, Godou shuddered.

'Here to the west lies another city, it shall be visited on the second day. The third day shall be that island -- the one where I encountered Verethragna. The fourth day and henceforth... Well, I'll simply decide then. Over the next six days, I will cast divine punishment upon these humans and this land first.'

In other words, Palermo was next on the second day?

The third day likely meant the sinking of Cagliari on the island of Sardinia. Melqart's declaration filled Godou with terror and rage.

"Stop joking around! How could I let you act so recklessly!?"

'Should you have any objections, use force to deter the divine king! Come, it is now time for battle. Show me what an immature god-slayer can do!'

Crash! In the instant the two columns were smashed by the violent wind, the sky rumbled.

Melqart completely ignored Zamparini who was next to Godou, leaving him alone -- or rather, he never registered the old man in his sight.

To a god like Melqart, humans were akin to stones on the roadside. It could not be helped.

...At the same time as the columns were being smashed by the storm, Godou discovered that Zamparini who had been by his side was blown away. Even someone with more powerful magic than Erica and greater experience was blown into the air like a scrap of paper.

"Ooooooooooooooh!?"

All he heard was the old man's screams.

Unable to oppose a god. In the face of a god's authority, all he could do was scream. Hence, it was only natural that he did not register in Melqart's eyes.

But as for Godou--

He reached out just as the stormy wind suddenly arrived.

There happened to be a tree branch waving before him, the branch of an olive tree, so Godou caught it, and using it as a lifesaving rope, he managed to stay on the ground.

This relied on reflexes to a great extent, probably.

As well as primal thoughts of "How could I die here?!" And most importantly, luck -- the good fortune to have something to grab onto just as he reached out with his hand. Due to this inexplicable luck, Godou survived.

Now only Godou was left. There were no signs of Zamparini.

If it had to be said, this was probably the difference between a Campione and an ordinary person. That was what Godou concluded after such a scene. Once again, the sky rumbled.

'Come, come! That was just a little test, continue to amuse me!'

Lightning shot from the sky, this time aiming towards Godou.

In that very instant, Godou's instincts told him he "will be struck."

But this was lightning, of course it could not be evaded. Unless he could find a lightning rod, but nothing like that could be found, it was hopeless. Was he going to die? No, how could he die now!?

Godou dispelled doubts of death by willing himself to renounce death.

At this moment, Godou awakened the power of the ferocious bird of prey that flew faster and higher than anything else -- the [Raptor].

Godou's body, senses and thought processes instantly accelerated, causing the surrounding world to decelerate in turn. The leaves and wooden debris blowing in the wind, the waves caused by the storm as well as the flashing lightning, everything seemed to be moving in slow motion from Godou's perspective.

He could see everything and evade them all.

Firm in this belief, Godou released the branch that he had been clinging to for dear life.

The violent wind swept Godou high up into the air, but he evaded the lightning strike as a result. He rose up in the air, but after a certain point, he began to fall rapidly towards the ground.

Originally, Godou should have smashed hard into the ground and died, but he landed softly.

His body felt lightened as if it had become weightless. Godou was now as light and nimble as the wind, and could move just as fast.

'Ho! Kukuku, very well! You have entered the realm of god-like lightning speed. Then I shall test you, brat, in a battle of speed!'

Thunder and lightning descended continually from the sky.

But using the [Raptor]'s eyes, Godou discerned all and desperately evaded using the [Raptor]'s speed. Looks like this incarnation has the ability to move at the speed of lightning, marveled Godou as he focused on evasion.

He should take this opportunity to find a weapon. Was there none in sight?

Godou searched his mind as he continued running as hard as he could. Didn't that image of a sword of light appear back when Erica asked him earlier, what kind of incarnation was it...?

'If lightning alone cannot hit, then it is time for my weapons to make an entrance. Chaser and Driver, come forth! O Yagrush! O Ayamur! Go and strike down the god-slayer!"

Flying in the sky were the magic clubs, Yagrush and Ayamur!

Godou trembled, for these were the weapons Melqart had used in the battle against the warlord Verethragna. The first club Yagrush appeared out of empty space while the second club Ayamur manifested out of the thunderclouds.

The former was a symbol of the wind while the latter was a symbol of lightning.

Like a swallow riding upon a cyclone, Yagrush flew with nimble agility. On the other hand, Ayamur flew in straight lines like lightning. Furthermore, both clubs possessed speed that rivaled the [Raptor].

Even so, Godou continued to run.

Sometimes jumping to the side, sometimes running straight forward, sometimes retreating backwards, sometimes lying prone on the ground. There were even times when Godou rolled across the ground in an unsightly manner, crawling on all four limbs like a wild beast.

All covered in dirt and mud, Godou continued to run, seeking the weapon of light--

He figured it out. Could it be that thing? Was it that weapon!?

However, immediately.

The time had come for his magic to be released, and suddenly, he felt intense pain in his heart.

His legs stopped and his body became sluggish. By the time he knew it, Godou was completely immobilized.

Tracing a U-shaped trajectory, Yagrush came flying!

Struck directly, Godou flew high into the air. Aiming at Godou in a straight line, Ayamur struck Godou for a second direct blow.

Godou flew across the sky like a baseball in a homerun.

Without an unnaturally sturdy body like his, an ordinary human would probably be smashed apart to leave no trace behind if struck by such destructive power.

Godou felt intense pain all over his body.

As befitted weapons of the gods. The man-eating tigers summoned by a mage were nothing in comparison. Godou could feel his muscles tearing, skeleton shattering, flesh scorching and bones dissolving.

Compared to the level of a mage, a Campione's body seemed immortal.

But faced with the equal or superior levels of [Heretic Gods], it was nothing special. Godou learned this painful lesson through the suffering of his body.

Nevertheless -- he still did not die instantly. This body was truly beyond common logic. Furthermore.

"What can I do now... Eh, this can't be happening?"

Flying through the air, Godou seemed to be hearing a female voice by his ear. Probably not Erica, for it was a voice of an even younger girl.

Then the image of a ram covered with golden fleece appeared in Godou's mind.

"I entrust everything in your hands..."

Godou made a request to the golden ram through instinct rather than rational decision making. With that, he lost consciousness and

all respiratory functions ceased. Of course, Melqart's Yagrush and Ayamur were still flying around, which meant things were not likely to end well.

The magic clubs spun around to strike at Godou once more. However at this time, the gift from Erica in Godou's possession -- the lion-shaped ornament began to give off light. Suddenly, Godou's body moved as if being sucked by a magnet.

With a whoosh, Godou's body flew at great speed towards the sea.

Thus he flew towards the fierce winds and raging waves of the sea. Due to the storm summoned by Melqart, Godou was swept by the waves and he sank into the sea.

Chapter 3 – Sword, Erica, Melqart

Part 1

"Hey Godoh, dying like this is completely unacceptable!"

"...Huh?"

Upon hearing these sudden words of mockery, Godou answered in a sluggish voice.

He opened his eyes to find a cute little girl. Her face was slender and dignified. Though "beautiful," her sense of "cuteness" was far more overwhelming in comparison. Judging by appearance, she seemed to be fourteen years old or so. Perhaps enhanced by the twintailed hairstyle, she gave off a rather young impression.

Puzzled by the girl's strange words, Godou surveyed his surroundings.

...This completely empty space contained nothing else. The entire place was grayish white. Even the ends of the horizon were gray. An incredible world of gray.

The girl before his eyes was wearing a white and flimsy dress. Which country did it come from?

"This is the [Boundary of Life and Immortality]. Perhaps it might be easier to understand if I used expressions like 'almost at the afterlife' or 'pretty much at the Sanzu River'[9] to describe this place?"

The beautiful girl explained in an exceptionally casual tone of voice.

"By the way, I am Pandora. But not a [Heretic God], mind you. I stand as a true and proper goddess, impossible for humans to encounter unless I descend to this realm. With the express intent of meeting my son, I came here from the Domain of Immortality."

"...Son? Who is that?"

"Of course I'm referring to you, Godoh. You are my son. You may call me mama, maman, mommy or whatever you wish, okay? "

"...So, Pandora-san, there's something I wish to ask."

"Wah, of all the choices you went with this! ~You're the worst~"

Pandora enunciated her words as if deliberately trying to act displeased.

"It's not very nice to look down on the bonds between mother and child, you know~"

"But my real mother is authentic Japanese. And not younger than me, either."

"Fine, stepmother then. The prospects of gaining a child-faced loli stepmother with no blood relations, that's known as 'moe' on earth, right? Isn't that really lucky?"

"I think even if you narrow the range to earth, it would only apply to a very small subset of people..."

Godou decided to change the subject.

"You said something like 'dying' just now. Did I really die?"

"Yes, you were promptly killed by Melqart-sama. But never fear , for Godoh's body is currently resurrecting on earth. Just before you died, you did well to understand the hint I sent."

The goddess who called herself Pandora smiled proudly.

"Since this is your first real battle, I did you a great service, allowing you to resurrect in one piece. For me and my husband, our children all tend to be rather impulsive and short-lived. Most of them end up dying on a battlefield somewhere. So, Godoh, you'd better be more careful."

"You and your husband's children... I get it now!"

Godou remembered. What Erica had mentioned before.

"Campiones are the illegitimate children of Epimetheus and Pandora, right?"

"Correct. Pandora in particular, is the stepmother who acts as the one who supports you god-slayers. Although I'm rather casual and completely irresponsible, I do offer hints on occasion."

As Pandora smiled, she emanated a certain alluring aura incommensurate with her child-like appearance.

Indeed this was a "womanly" existence. Godou understood that great wisdom lay beneath her mesmerizing cuteness.

Even though she did not act very proper in behavior, she was still a goddess.

"Well, even though you'll forget about seeing me as soon as you return to earth, remnants of my teachings will survive somewhere in your subconscious, so don't worry."

"I will forget?"

"Yes. When traveling between this realm and the world on earth , all sorts of things can happen."

"What... Anyway, if possible, could you tell me something? I'm currently in trouble with a god, so how should I fight? I seem to recall some kind of weapon of light."

Given this rare chance, Godou decided to ask this question.

Pandora made a slightly mischievous expression and smiled with great pride as she explained:

"It would be meaningless if I told you the answer -- or rather, it wouldn't be fun anymore -- ah, that's not right, it won't help Godoh at all. You have to try harder by yourself."

"In that case... I get it."

Godou gave up and nodded indifferently.

After all, the one doing the fighting was himself. Always thinking of relying on others for victory would not be conducive to handling split second changes during intense confrontations. In this era of junior cultivation from the ground up, Godou had no objections as a baseball player and a mighty athlete.

No matter how many comrades stood by his side, ultimately the one fighting to the very end was himself.

In a team -- obviously he had to trust in his comrades to back him up. However, were he unable to fight alone, he would be useless in a team anyway. Hence, it was imperative he put forth all of his own effort first.

As these thoughts crossed Godou's mind, Pandora watched him with an amused expression.

"Hehe. No matter what kind of past life they led previously, the vast majority of children who became god-slayers already knows how to fight. Godoh is no exception. So let me skip that part and tell you something useful."

Hearing unexpected words from the stepmother, Godou straightened himself in full attentiveness.

"Even considering the entire history of mankind, you are a unique god-slayer. There is no point for you to emulate any other person. It would be utter stupidity. Consequently, please, always stay true to yourself."

"...In other words, do things my own way?"

"Yes. Follow your heart and let instinct guide you. Fight smartly with craftiness. Only by doing this will you become the strongest warrior on earth. There is no need to worry yourself too much!"

Like she said, if he could emulate someone else, things would be much easier...

Casually advised to undertake a challenging direction, Godou could not help but smile wryly.

"Anyway, I guess I'll start learning how to use my powers flexibly."

"My, how hardworking of Godoh! However, it's best if you don't do that, because it's useless."

"Eh?"

"The grand enchantment for a person's rebirth as a god-slayer... There are many strange aspects to it, probably because it is such a preposterous process after all. For example, the condition of 'no matter what, only actual combat works' or the like. Since god-slayers only resemble humans in appearance but are actually more like demonic beasts inside, it's only natural to progress like wild beasts, no?"

"In other words, earnest effort is useless?"

"Yes! God-slayers' authorities can only be honed on the battlefield through actual combat. But that's totally fine, after all, ancient warriors were the same. As long as you kill enough enemies, you will become powerful♪"

"Please don't use such a disturbing analogy!"

Seeing Pandora winking with a thumbs up sign, Godou could not stop himself from screaming.

"By the way, Godoh, your authority is a bit unreliable. It might be a little dangerous if you try to do things alone, so please be careful."

"What do you mean by unreliable?"

"It seems like you need the assistance of friends in order to satisfy certain activation conditions. Isn't this a power that can only be used when someone is trying to beat up Godoh?"

"Come to think of it, there is also a condition of 'only when facing strong enough opponents.'"

"Godoh's heart is only roused when threatened by true battle. This is probably what limits you from using your authority. Ultimately, a rampaging soul is necessary to hone a god-slayer's power."

Tension levels and the rousing of emotions were the most important? This fact seriously needed careful attention.

"So if you ever need to fight, just shout 'Come and kill me with everything you've got' and everything will be fine♪"

"I'm definitely not going to do that!"

It looked like the future will be filled with trials and tribulations . Even so, had it been any different--

When Godou came to, he found himself lying on a simple bed in a room surrounded by white walls. There was an odor of medicine. Along the bare white wall was a practical-looking sideboard. This was apparently a hospital room.

Also, Erica was sitting on a chair beside the bed.

Godou pushed against the bed to raise his upper torso. He had died during the battle with Melqart but managed to resurrect. For some reason, he was sure of that.

"I have something to say first, so please listen carefully."

Erica declared immediately. Even though she tried her best to stay calm, she could not hide her irrepressible rage. It was a voice that seemed to shake the air.

"If you can come back from death, then please say so before dying...! You are truly a fool beyond help!"

"D-Don't say something so unreasonable. I was suddenly thrust on stage without any preparation."

Severely chastised by Erica, Godou muttered in response.

"This power to revive from the verge of death, cannot be used unless I am actually about to die. If I die completely, it's meaningless... Anyway, I admit I'm at fault, sorry."

Getting up from bed, Godou bowed his head.

"It seems like I made you worry, I'm really sorry."

Erica was angry because she was really worried about him, right?

This apology resulted in provoking an unexpected response from the defiant blonde beauty.

"What idiotic nonsense are you talking about! As if anyone would worry about you!"

Saying that, Erica's face was entirely flushed red. However, if she was not worried then there would be no reason for her to be this angry.

As Godou felt skeptical, Erica shouted more and more emotionally.

"I am only telling you this because I cannot bear the sight of your stupid behavior. Do not get any strange and mistaken ideas!"

Apparently, this declaration was her attempt to cover up the reason for her anger.

In light of Erica's outspoken habits, such words clearly showed her loss of composure.

"The only thing I'm worrying about is at most my own reputation! I even sacrificed my purity for the sake of helping you. If you died just like that, that would be truly shameful!"

Saying that, Erica turned her face away in disgust, refusing to admit anything.

Godou suppressed the urge to laugh wryly and waited for Erica to calm down.

"By the way, how long did I sleep for?"

"It was during daytime when the battle with Melqart occurred, just before 1pm. It is now evening at 7pm. You've slept continuously for six hours or so."

Erica swiftly replied in response to Godou's change of subject.

"This is a hospital?"

"Yes. A little hospital roughly 2km away from the Soluntum ruins. It was not easy but I managed to bring you here for sanctuary after you collapsed."

"You did well to save me from that god..."

"Remember the lion figure I gave you beforehand? It was actually Cuore di Leone, altered by [Transformation] magic."

Godou was surprised. The lion-shaped item was actually that magic sword?

"I originally planned to watch your battle from afar, but later on I saw you were almost dead. So I hastily used a [Magnet] spell to summon Cuore di Leone back to me. That was what you were carrying."

"Melqart didn't pursue?"

"No. Just as I already said, you were almost dead."

"Eh?"

"Blunt trauma all over your body, numerous broken bones, internal hemorrhage, ruptured internal organs, damage to the brain and spine, burns covering over 80% of your skin area. Naturally, your heart also stopped and you were unable to breathe on your own."

"I-It was that serious..."

"Under such conditions, even I thought it would be hopeless, even when you are a Campione."

Erica's manner of speaking made it seem like she was very angry.

"Your current body is truly ridiculous. Not long after that, you resumed breathing and your body kept healing while you slept. It has already recovered completely."

It was ridiculous indeed. Even though he was the subject in question, Godou nodded vigorously.

"By the way, what about Zamparini-san?"

"Currently missing, after being blown away by the storm. However, since he completely failed to enter Melqart's view at the time, I think his chances of survival are quite high. The magi of [Panormus] are currently searching for him, but due to the current weather, they haven't made much progress."

Godou looked outside the window.

Enduring the roaring wind and pelted by the massive raindrops , the window had been rattling noisily all this time.

"The storm has continued all the while?"

"Yes, just like this all along. However, the storm zone only covers the northwest region of Sicily centered on the city of Palermo. Also, Soluntum Archaeological Park... was sunk earlier into the sea, at dusk."

"What did you say!?"

"Those ruins were located on a hillside facing the sea, right? Having weakened its foundations using the pouring rain, Melqart attacked the ground with Yagrush and Ayamur, causing a massive landslide which swept the ruins from the hillside into the sea."

Godou recalled Melqart's announcement.

Every day at sunset, he would sink a city from his former territory into the sea--

Although the ruins of Soluntum attracted tourists, it was fortunate that visitors were few in number. However, tomorrow's target was Palermo, a city with a population of one million.

Erica nodded as if she read Godou's worries and changed the subject.

"By the way, no matter how overabundant a Campione's vitality is, this resurrection performance was way too dramatic and miraculous. What's the secret to this trick?"

"Is there any sheep amongst Verethragna's incarnations?"

"Of the ten incarnations, the eighth is the ram."

"That's the one. When I was struck dead by Melqart, a sheep came to mind. It felt like it could help me escape death, so I tried entrusting my wish to it. So that's what happened. However, I still don't understand."

Godou sat on the bed, bewildered.

"Amongst the ten incarnations, the bull gives monstrous strength, the camel gives kicking attacks, the boar is a monster, and the bird gives extreme speed. I can understand all of those. But why would a sheep bring recovery?"

"Perhaps it's because sheep have been a symbol of bountiful harvests and vitality since ancient times."

Erica's fluent answer rendered Godou dumbfounded.

"As a type of wild beast that is easily tamed and kept, sheep have been domesticated since very early times as a source of food to support human life. Eventually, it became a sacred beast."

"Sacred beast..."

"The sheep is a sacred beast with deep ties to royal authority. In ancient times -- particularly amongst nomadic societies, livestock numbers were directly correlated with reliable food supplies, wealth, as well as the population that could be supported."

So sheep had this kind of significance? Godou widened his eyes .

"Godou, the ten incarnations you usurped, probably recreates Verethragna's powers piecemeal -- the different abilities unleashed by his transformation into various forms."

"Indeed, that guy was able to do a lot more. And he wasn't restricted in the number of uses."

"Number of uses?"

"I've felt it ever since the first time I used this power. Whenever I used an incarnation, it felt like it was no longer available for a period of time. That's right... It's just intuition, but I think it takes a day to reset."

Erica sighed lightly in response to Godou's words.

"Well, it's not surprising to have this kind of restriction when you have ten different transformations. Next, there are the conditions for using each incarnation."

"Yes. I can use the bull when fighting strong enemies, the camel when I'm injured, the boar when I want to destroy a massive target , the bird when the enemy's speed is astounding, and the sheep probably when I'm about to die... W-What about that weapon of light, how do I use it? Yeah, Erica, that bright and shiny thing."

"It's the [Golden Sword] Verethragna was using, right?"

Erica was the first to utter the description that had suddenly occurred in his mind before he died.

"I thought of it while you were recovering. And stop using such a crude description like 'bright and shiny weapon.' You should call it the [Brilliant Sword of Light] instead. Pay attention, Godou, you're probably lacking in poetic talent."

Criticized, Godou began scratching his head.

"Well, I can't disagree at all... In any case, can we think of a way to find out how the [Sword] can be used?"

"Why not do the same as before, figure it out on the fly?"

"In a battle against a god, it's not gonna work."

Godou declared in no uncertain terms as Erica pondered.

"How should I put it... Right, as a first step, I have to follow my heart and let instinct guide me. Also, I feel like I'm not supposed to forget about being smart and crafty. I don't think I could have done this before I went to the ruins."

Godou muttered as if reciting words of warning that had been carved somewhere in his heart.

After Erica listened with great intrigue, she offered new information.

"Understood. Let's think again later. By the way, Lucretia of Sardinia has woken up. I obtained her contact through a Cagliari association. If you have anything to ask, Godou, why don't you give her a call?"

Part 2

'Hmm, I suppose words of congratulations are in order, young man. An instant job change from commoner to level one Devil King... In any case, it's great to know you are safe. It is truly worthy of celebration.'

In an idle lobby of the little hospital, Godou and Erica were using a public telephone in a corner to contact a female acquaintance.

'I've already been informed of the basic situation by Miss Erica. Having to duel the divine king Melqart immediately after your rebirth as a god-slayer, your life is truly one filled with stormy drama.'

Lucretia Zola spoke with nonchalant airs as usual.

'I'd really like to help you, but given this dreadful weather, neither ship nor plane are allowed to depart, while flight magic has its dangers. Basically, all I can do is cheer for you wholeheartedly. Well, do your best.'

"...Thank you very much."

Such encouragement was far from reassuring, but Godou still expressed his thanks through the telephone.

"By the way, Lucretia-san, the gold and shiny [Sword] that Verethragna was using... It seems like I can use it too, right, so what conditions would it require?"

A question that went straight to the point. Given she was one of the top witches in all of Europe, one should hope she was capable of offering useful advice.

'I wouldn't necessarily know.'

"That's very true."

'Indeed, when Verethragna understands the detailed origins of an enemy god, he is able to slice apart the opponent's divinity -- No, wait a minute...'

Lucretia suddenly stopped and began to whisper.

'Learn. In order to understand the enemy and forge the blade of wisdom.'

These sudden instructions caused Godou to go "Eh?" in response.

'Fufufu. I suddenly received a divine revelation. How fortunate of you, young man. Or rather, it must be the divine presence of Melqart filling the Mediterranean which stimulated my inspiration . Anyway, it's your lucky day.'

"What does it mean though?"

'Well. The enemy's mighty stature has given you an advantage instead. It's best that I leave the detailed explanations to Miss Erica . I pray for your victory, Your Majesty the Devil King.'

"As expected of the top ranking Witch of Sardinia."

Sitting in the back seat of the BMW speeding its way across the stormy streets, Erica expressed admiration after listening to Godou .

The hospital where they had stayed earlier was located in a town near the Soluntum Archaeological Park. But since Godou had already recovered, there was no reason to stay any further. After contacting [Panormus], they were picked up.

The driver was one of Zamparini's subordinates.

"Her spirit vision really revealed something important. This could very well be the key to victory."

"Spirit vision -- that's something like clairvoyance, right?"

"Yes. Verethragna's final incarnation is the [Warrior] wielding the golden sword. We've already seen it before, how it was used as spell words for slicing gods apart. Godou, you probably need to understand the enemy's divinity in order to forge the sword. Let's try it immediately!"

Erica spoke with great enthusiasm.

"Melqart is the king ruling over the Phoenician realm of the gods. His original name is Baal, which he also mentioned before. His myths later spread to Greece where they became the prototype for the hero Heracles."

Erica repeated again what she had said before.

"Baal is a sky god with very ancient origins. Did you know his name was also clearly recorded in the Old Testament of the Bible? Baal was considered the greatest enemy of the [God] of Judaism and Christianity. At the same time, he was also a divinity which greatly influenced those monotheistic religions."

"Eh, is that so!?"

"In the Old Testament of the Bible, those who did not follow monotheism mostly engaged in idol worship of demonic deities. In many cases, this was Baal because he was the most popular god

worshiped by inhabitants of the ancient region of Canaan in the Bible's Old Testament... What's the matter?"

"Hmm... I have a feeling like something is accumulating... That should be the description, right?"

It felt like a tiny drop of water had fallen into the pool in his heart--

That was the impression Godou received after listening to Erica's profound words.

"It feels like we're going in the right direction."

"Good. Then let's make the most of our time as I explain Melqart's origins to you. I think it'll probably take two to three hours or so, please pay attention and listen carefully!"

While the car raced along the roads at night, amidst howling winds, splattering rain and roaring thunder, Erica continued to teach with her clear tones and melodic voice.

Arriving at the Zamparini mansion in its master's absence, they continued in the bedroom where they had spent the previous night .

Erica was highly talented whether it came to speaking or teaching. With great clarity and organization, she conveyed "what kind of god Melqart was" in simple and easily understood terms even when interjected with random chatter.

Even so--

"Looks like... It's not working. Why!?"

With the storm showing no signs of abating, midnight had arrived. Godou clutched his head.

While he listened to Erica's instruction, only a trickle of knowledge managed to flow into the pool in his heart. It felt like forging brilliantly lustrous golden steel, one particle at a time. However, it was totally not enough.

"What am I missing!?"

It would pose no problem to Godou if he were asked to write a two-hundred-word essay on Melqart right now. Nevertheless, what on earth was the problem!?

"Was Lucretia mistaken...? A spirit vision received by a witch like her should not be this impractical. Then the problem is -- could it be that?"

Erica seemed to have realized something.

"Hey Godou, can you tell me about the influences of ancient Sumerian civilizations on the origins of the Ugaritic pantheon headed by Baal?"

"Of course not. Probably those ancient civilizations like Sumer or Mesopotamia?"

Godou answered using what vague knowledge he could recall.

"By the way, Erica, you never taught me that at all."

"Well, how about the Phoenicians, Canaanites and Hebrews who worshiped Baal and equivalently Melqart as their chief deity? Do you understand what roles these groups played between the ancient orient and the Mediterranean?"

"Of course not. Other than the fact that the Phoenicians were a seafaring tribe, I know nothing."

"That must be it!"

Erica immediately exclaimed as she shook her head.

"Right now, you've only memorized the concise origins, but you have yet to understand the god's true nature and process of development. That is why you're unable to use the golden sword... "

"Simply memorizing and rote learning won't work!?"

Godou was greatly surprised. Nevertheless, he did agree with her statement.

"Let alone essays, you could write a book or two using the knowledge required... Before we attempt any further, let me ask this first, what exactly do I need to learn?"

"Right... For sure, Phoenician history is required. Likewise for knowledge about ancient Palestine. Let's skip Judaism and Christianity which grew out of oriental soil for now since it'd be more appropriate to first understand what is considered the most

ancient culture, that of the Sumerians. Also, same for Egypt. After that, there is the primitive nomadic society which gave rise to the existence of the sky god..."

"Can this lecture be done within half a day or so?"

"Are you stupid? Even if you spend two hundred times the time , it's impossible!"

" "....." "

Realizing the difficulty they faced, Godou and Erica fell silent.

In that very instant, a large crash of thunder descended nearby.

BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM! The crash resounded.

Furthermore, blown by strong wind, a broken board smashed into the bedroom window with a great "bang!" With the sound of shattering glass, raging wind and rain invaded the room.

"In that case, we might as well do what we can..."

Realizing the storm was strengthening, Godou muttered.

"Erica, in any case, you should tell me all the information you consider essential, one piece at a time. I don't know if we'll make it in time, but we must give our full effort for as long as we're able to. "

"That's a waste of effort. Rather than that, let's first review our options for a more practical plan."

As Godou suggested they continue no matter what, Erica made a proposal.

"For example, there's [Instruction] magic, which can pour knowledge into the mind in very short time... It will be much more practical and efficient in comparison."

"Eh? Such convenient magic exists!?"

"Yes. Although it's a spell which only maintains its effects for half a day or so, it does allow an entire library of books' worth of knowledge to be transmitted without issue. However, there remains the fact that you are a Campione."

Though Erica displayed hope for the first time, she immediately continued with an expression of melancholy.

"Remember how all the magic cast on us was deflected by you? That effect not only applies to hostile magic, but also towards beneficial magic as well."

"So there's no other way to remember other than through magic after all..."

"Well, it's not like we're Bianchi, taking shortcuts... Ah."

Erica suddenly stopped talking as if she had said something wrong. Furthermore, her beautiful face went all red. Godou was intrigued. What was going on?

"You've already said this much, don't just stop there. Continue."

"T-There shouldn't be anything to continue! I refuse to sacrifice any additional purity beyond what I've already lost! Forget everything you just heard!"

"W-Wait a minute! Where are you going!?"

Erica suddenly ran out of the room, screaming with her face flushed red, completely ignoring Godou's calls for her to stop. Her figure gradually receded in the distance.

Part 3

Night had passed and it was now 11am the next day.

Godou was idling in the Zamparini residence's astonishingly spacious living room. It was like a hotel lobby with three very large sofa couches. There was also a large LCD television.

Erica had gone missing since last night. After questioning the maids, Godou found out she had apparently left the mansion.

Godou had wondered if he should go find her but finally decided against it. He was now sitting alone on a couch, watching television. A local cable news program was currently airing, reporting live the situation of Palermo after the storm zone had arrived for half a day.

Within the confines of an interior bay in the harbor, what should have been a calm and peaceful sea was now a turbulent storm.

The seaside route of Corso Vittorio Emanuele had also flooded.

On this city's bustling street were numerous tourist attractions such as duomo cathedrals or the Palazzo dei Normanni. It also featured sixteenth century structures such as Porta Nuova on its west and Porta Felice on the eastern end.

Just now, Godou had asked one of Zamparini's suited subordinates about the situation in the city.

There seemed to be an exceptionally intense aura occupying the airspace above the Bay of Palermo. Melqart was causing the storm from there... That was what the magi had observed.

By the way, it really was an exceptionally fierce storm...

Though compared to the most severe class of storm that Godou knew, this level of rain and wind speed was definitely not the highest. From what he could tell on television, cars could still barely make their way across the roads near the Bay of Palermo. It was not yet the kind of flood which paralyzed the functioning of an entire city.

To Melqart, this storm was probably just a warmup exercise.

The attack scheduled to arrive at dusk again, now that would be true divine punishment descending from the sky god...

"Ultimately, no matter what, I have to face him..."

Muttering to himself, Godou felt burdened with a heavy heart.

If he simply let the situation develop as before and entered another "duel" against Melqart, the result would likely be identical. He would be killed without the slightest idea how to counterattack . Trying to challenge the outcome again would not bring any changes.

With an incredibly gloomy heart, Godou looked up at the images on television.

No matter what their size, ships and boats moored at the harbor were gradually washed away.

The city streets were flooded as a result of the persisting rainstorm. The howling wind was sending signs and timber flying, as well as wooden huts and building materials such as bricks from some home... Not only were branches snapped off by the wind, even entire tree trunks could be found scattered across the streets.

The city of Palermo was brought to a tragic state.

Melqart had already announced. He will sink this city into the sea today at sunset.

"I can't ignore what's happening, right..."

Godou had witnessed all sorts of scenes on the television.

This was enough to rouse Godou's determination. If the one who interfered in the battle between Verethragna the war god and Melqart the god of storms, if he himself did not handle this situation--

Just at that moment, noticing someone behind him, Godou turned around to find Erica.

"What the heck are you doing? You didn't even try to find me. I can't believe you're just lazing around in a place like this."

Despite Erica's scolding words, Godou replied calmly.

"Because I knew you'd return by yourself."

"Why?"

"Since I'm the only one who has the slightest chance of winning, and Erica, you're the only one who knows the way to victory, if we don't cooperate, that god cannot be stopped. I felt that given you're so smart, you'll definitely figure that out and come back. Well--"

Seeing that Erica was clearly still angry, Godou continued.

"Basically, it's the only choice left given no alternatives... That's what I thought."

"Isn't that completely obvious!? Had there been an alternative path of survival, I would never have steeled my heart to return. And to think Godou you are sitting here all casual, it's truly infuriating!"

"A-Am I really that casual?"

As Erica continued her temper tantrum, Godou was at his wits' end.

"I'm really worried as I watch this city and island being targeted , you know."

"So am I. In order to safeguard a virgin's purity, sacrificing a city or two would not be too much -- that's what I was thinking, but as a knight, I can't really allow myself to give in to such temptation..."

"Purity? Didn't you mention that yesterday as well?"

As Godou stood there bewildered, Erica suddenly traced out complicated patterns in the air with her finger to form some kind of seal.

"...This is barrier magic. A spell to prevent anyone from coming in here for now."

She's making sure we have privacy! Godou felt more and more suspicious.

"Magic is ineffective against Devil King Campiones. This is a fundamental principle that cannot be overturned. However, exceptions do exist after all. Godou, you've already experienced it before."

"Eh?"

"After the battle against Bianchi, I gave you a drug, right? One that produces the same effect as performing healing magic on a human. You recovered so quickly thanks to that."

"Eh? But isn't magic ineffective against Campiones?"

"Yes. But through the intake of a magical drug, applying magic to the body from the inside is a completely different matter."

"So, based on what you said yesterday, Erica, if there's a drug infused with magic for transmitting knowledge -- all I need to do is swallow it!"

"That's exactly the issue. But no such drug exists. Even if it existed, the chances of successfully teaching you all knowledge on Melqart... Is zero."

Asserting directly, Erica turned to face Godou with a decisive expression.

"Only one method remains. Applying [Instruction] magic through the mouth, pouring all necessary knowledge into you -- I've already spent a night in contemplation, there is no other way!"

Applying through the mouth? In other words, could it be that?

"Could it be, s-something like mouth to mouth!?"

"Yes. Precisely. Applying magic to you in any other manner will not work."

Before they knew it, Godou and Erica found themselves looking at each other face to face.

They were both blushing. After all, this was how embarrassing this kind of thing was to them.

"To be that concerned with purity... Erica is actually inexperienced, after all?"

"I-Isn't that obvious? As the daughter of the Blandelli family, of course I wish to preserve a virgin state for the beloved man I shall marry one day..."

Erica confessed despite her trembling lips.

"However, in any case, because of such extenuating circumstances, it can't be helped. Imagining myself from a [King]'s standpoint, if there was a young maiden beside me who possessed the knowledge I required for battle -- I would immediately order her to offer her lips. For the sake of dueling a god."

"N-No, but that's terrible!"

"Which is why I said it can't be helped -- rather, this is quite unfair. We are simply doing what we must do. You are fighting because you are [King]. I am assisting the [King] as a knight. All for the sake of saving this poor innocent city and its people."

With what appeared to be awe-inspiring honor, as well as the shy heart of a pure maiden, Erica declared.

Furthermore, she began to whisper as she brought her face near Godou's cheek.

"You should understand clearly now? There's no other way."

"A-Ah yeah. But then, how should I put this--"

"How indecisive of you... Fine, if you don't have the courage to do so, I will take initiative and kiss you first."

Declaring courageously, Erica pressed her lips even closer. However.

Just as she was about to reach Godou's lips, her movements stopped. Those lustrous lips of hers, were trembling nonstop. She must be scared after all, hesitating over her first time.

"Godou. You are the [King] while I am the knight. Hence, this should stand as no loss to either you or me."

Erica shuddered as she mustered her courage and drew her face close again.

Consequently, Godou also steeled his determination. After the battle against Verethragna, Erica had kept initiative firmly in her hands, but this could not be allowed to continue indefinitely.

He definitely could not become anyone's puppet.

The most important thing was "decisiveness." As well as the shouldering of responsibility. Hence, I shall--

"Erica, I will fight Melqart. I'm very sorry, but please lend your strength to me!"

While making this declaration, Godou approached with his face -- and took Erica's lips.

"Mmm, hmm!?"

"Teach me, things about that god."

Kissing awkwardly as he muttered. Erica's lips were sealed.

"G-Got it. Okay, Godou? Melqart, and equivalently, Baal originated from the primitive society of Semitic tribes, a very ancient divinity, you see..."

"S-Semitic tribes? In concrete terms, that means?"

"Just ask slowly and gradually, one question at a time. I will teach you properly -- and transmit to you... Mmmm."

Both of them were clearly unaccustomed to this.

Kissing as they pressed their lips firmly together, they frantically conversed. Following such a rhythm, their teeth often collided and they even made unnecessary talk.

Nevertheless, they continued to hold their lips tightly together.

Erica's magic was transmitting vivid images and bountiful knowledge into Godou's mind. Numerous geographical locations and historical drama. The names and legends of the gods who ruled over this great land. For the sake of connecting various elements, and interpreting all kinds of keywords...

"As Melqart's true form, Baal is a divinity that could not have been conceived in a land with four seasons like Japan. He is a god born from the desert and the wilderness. Furthermore, he is the [

God of Storms] formed from both the searing sun and torrential rains."

Passionately whispering softly, Erica's lips felt unbelievably sweet.

"Records of Baal in literature are extremely few in number. Nevertheless, he frequently makes his appearance in a certain ancient text that survives in close proximity to us. Namely, the Bible's Old Testament. Baal's traces are actually most commonly found in the sacred text of the religion that regarded him with enmity."

While knowledge was repeatedly transmitted, the two of them kept leaning their bodies forward more and more. Godou seemed to be trying to cover up Erica's mouth completely as he pressed his lips down upon her.

Sealed by such pressure, Erica's lips continued to transmit knowledge without pause.

However, she did not remain passive and reactionary for long.

Erica opened her mouth, trying to surround Godou's lips as she kissed him this time.

Furthermore, she was using her lips to carefully explore Godou's lips. Even the tiniest of spaces between their lips were being cautiously compressed as they continued to kiss.

Wishing to probe ever deeper, their hearts opened sincerely to each other and connected.

Those were Godou's hopes, and probably Erica's too. Thus, their kissing naturally grew more and more passionate as they continued.

Perhaps due to their inexperience in this type of behavior, they did not reach overly intense heights.

However, their rich and delicate kisses caused saliva to continually escape the confines of their lips, completely moistening the corners of their mouths, moving as if under a dreamlike state.

Not long after that, the two of them suddenly let go of each other's lips with a surprised expression, their faces blushing brightly.

Immediately, Godou could feel Verethragna's dormant power in his body awaken.

The pool of water in his heart that was previously accumulating in a drop-wise fashion, was flooded all of a sudden -- filling his heart with an incredible sense of satisfaction.

It could now be used. What the warlord Verethragna had used once, the god-severing spell words were now ready for use.

Certain he had obtained a new weapon, Godou nodded deeply.

Part 4

Things were exceptionally awkward afterwards.

Godou and Erica were unable to look into each other's face. No matter what, it was too embarrassing.

Godou desperately searched his mind for a way to start a conversation with Erica. However, he was a fifteen-year-old boy with absolutely no experience in this area. Most probably, he would not be able to find any model answer.

"S-Say, Erica..."

"Do not speak a single word! There is no need for that... I am totally fine. I, Erica Blandelli, will not lose composure to something like this. This is no shock to me."

Cutting Godou off, Erica murmured as she continued comforting herself.

"Besides... Although there was no choice given the emergency situation, it is still within acceptable limits, even to me. Had the boy I kissed been an earthworm or a hyena, even if those were lips that would drive me to bite my tongue to commit suicide afterwards, I will not complain a single word."

"I-Is that so?"

"Besides, there also exists the case of the frog prince kissing the princess. So there is nothing strange here anyway. So like I said, I am totally fine."

She really seemed quite shocked, but her defiant attitude was definitely intact.

Godou was slightly reassured. If it would help this glamorous girl recover her spirits, he did not mind being labelled an

earthworm, a frog or anything like that. That was what Godou thought in earnest.

No matter what it took, he was willing to compensate Erica for going so far. Godou spoke up:

"Hey Erica. I'm a pacifist and I hate conflict and violent behavior. Furthermore, the fact that there are no absolutes in the outcomes of battles, that is also one of my beliefs."

"You seem to be talking to yourself."

Finding Erica had recovered slightly, Godou continued.

"I'm going to confront Melqart next. I definitely will not lose to him."

"...Really, definitely?"

"Ah yes. I can swear on it."

"Fine. Very well. In that case I will forgive you completely. Godou, promise me you will fight for my sake. Furthermore, you must save this island from Melqart's threat!"

"Of course. Leave it all to me!"

After that, they did not bring up the topic of [Instruction] again.

Erica lifted her face with vigor and swept her hand through the brilliant blonde hair that adorned her head like a crown. Godou was also determined to forget the previous scene and go back to normal.

Only the battle lay before them. Erica summoned magi from [Panormus] and ordered them to prepare the car. Their destination was the sea, the Bay of Palermo where Melqart was hidden high above in the sky.

Gazing through the window of the car, Godou witnessed the city's storm-battered state which could not be seen through television.

Due to the severe weather, there were few pedestrians about.

Overwhelming drainage systems, rainwater flooded the streets with volumes on the level of a small river. Nevertheless, thanks to the height and water resistance offered by the 4WD vehicle, they managed to reach the main road along the shore. This was Via Cala facing the Bay of Palermo.

Godou and Erica got off the vehicle before the spacious yacht harbor that was once a trading port.

"While handing matters over to [Panormus] to handle yesterday , apparently all the people in the buildings and facilities along the shore have been evacuated. There's basically no one in the area, so it's fine even if you ignore the issue of casualties."

"If anyone stayed near such a turbulent sea, they could be engulfed by giant waves at any time."

The Bay of Palermo had been an excellent harbor since pre-era times, for it was an extremely calm inner bay. But currently, this stretch of sea was as turbulent as outer waters during storms.

Pelted by the rainwater of the raging storm, Godou's and Erica's clothes were instantly drenched.

It was currently two in the afternoon. If they failed to defeat Melqart before dusk, the city of Palermo would be sunk into the sea--

With a glance from Godou, Erica immediately took off. Her assigned role was to provide support as the situation demanded while keeping a certain distance.

In a battle against a god, it would be too dangerous to fight in a formation like in an RPG.

That was what Godou learnt from Zamparini's example. Like Erica had done last time, it was best to have his comrades stay back in reserve so that they can react according to changes in the situation.

"Are you there, Melqart!? Please respond to my challenge now!"

Godou yelled out to sea as he endured the rain splattering upon him. Immediately, lightning flashed.

'Oh! The god-slayer of the orient! How resilient of you to survive!'

"Yeah. So what!?"

Godou shouted loudly in response to the god's voice accompanied by the rumbles of roaring thunder.

'Kukuku... As Melqart who vanquished his own elder brother the dragon king Yam[10], I seem to have gone a little senile. Could it be possible that I actually failed to discern my enemy's strength in reserve! Though there are many gods carrying the attribute of immortality, you seem to possess the same authority, brat!'

The raging storm suddenly stopped.

A fissure opened up between the thick and heavy thunderclouds, allowing sunshine to reach the ground.

A [Heretic God] was present within the beam of light. His appearance was identical to the Phoenician divine king Godou had faced in the ruins on the island of Sardinia.

The strongly built man was covered with bulging musculature and overflowing with an air of wild roughness. His tousled hair always left a strong impression on others. His attire consisted of a tattered mantle of grubby cloth, leather breastplate and sandals. Nevertheless, in contrast to his coarse attire, his entire body emanated a [King]'s terrifying splendor.

And he was very huge. Melqart's height stood at 15m or so.

'Brat, the authority you managed to usurp from Verethragna certainly proves to be rather versatile. However, I would advise you not to entrust your hopes to clever little powers. Against the unrelenting hunter of dragons, Melqart the embodiment of lightning, the warlord of the changing forms is nothing but a minor character!'

"So what. Even if you are indeed the ancient [King] of the gods."

Godou looked up at the giant descending along with the sun's rays.

"You are definitely not invincible, nor are you an existence who knows nothing of defeat. But that guy -- Verethragna, claimed to be the strongest, most victorious, and never defeated. Well, even though it sounds a bit strange to say it myself, still, the odds don't seem that stacked against me."

'Oh? You sound like you know everything about me, eh...'

Giant Melqart landed on the main road by the shore, laughing delightfully.

'Nevertheless, the battlefield is not decided by fighting words but arrows and blades as well as fists. I shall do well to teach this lesson to your body thoroughly!'

"Nay. Words can become power and turn into swords. Have you forgotten, Melqart?!"

Words continuously surfaced in Godou's mind.

He already understood. These were spell words. The scripture for controlling the war god's authority.

The incantations for summoning and raising the power dormant in Kusanagi Godou's body.

"Your power was once sliced apart by that guy's words, right? If you really believe that I failed to inherit that power, isn't it too early for jumping to conclusions!? --I am the strongest!"

Hearing Godou's spell words, Melqart went "Hmm" and entered a stance.

"Brat, you've usurped his blade -- the brilliant golden sword!?"

"Yes! Behold the words of this incantation, both eloquent and powerful. I am the sword of wisdom, that which tears foes apart. I am the strongest, for I am the one holding all victory in my hands. I shall smash through all enemies in my way!"

Turning into Verethragna's final incarnation, Godou unleashed the golden sword.

Flashing light gradually flooded the surroundings.

"Melqart is a god born in the ancient Middle East. Baal is his true name. He was originally the [Sky] -- the god worshiped by primitive nomadic tribes who tended to sheep and lived upon them. In ancient times, people viewed this god as the infinite unbounded sky itself!"

Several tiny spheres of light manifested in response to these words.

At first there were only ten or so, but very soon their numbers multiplied. Each and every one of them was brilliantly golden in color.

This was the [Sword] indeed. The god-severing golden blade.

"Central Asian nomadic tribes -- such as the Mongolians, also deified the [Sky] in a similar manner. However, Baal, and equivalently, Melqart belongs to the Middle East... A god born in the land of the orient. He is not simply a god of the sky, for he has one greatest attribute. Namely, the god of the [Rainy Season]!"

The ultimate identity of the god before him. The surrounding brightness increased as he continued to chant -- before he knew it there were over a thousand flashing spheres of light hovering all around Godou.

Bright as the countless stars that fill the night sky, it was like a sparkling galaxy.

"In the land of the Middle East where the dry and the rainy seasons are distinct and separate, 'storms' only arrive during the rainy season. Accompanied by the raging wind of cyclones and land sinking from the pouring rain, lightning descends from the sky. Nevertheless, because storms bring rainwater -- without the

benefits brought by this water, plants and animals, and even humans would certainly fail to survive. Though your 'storms' cause the death of many, it is also the nourishment of life!"

'Hmph -- true words. I am the storm of the rainy season. The god who embodies both blessing and destruction from the sky!'

Melqart yelled.

'Now I shall test the results of your sword forged from words of wisdom. O Wind, O Rain, O Thunder!'

These too, were spell words.

Like the ones used by Godou, they were words carrying power.

'By Melqart's true name of Baal Hadad, I summon! O Storm, listen to the calls of the cloud rider, make haste and come!"

Melqart's muscular body dissociated to become violent wind. Furthermore, hundreds of flashes of lightning were fired in all directions.

"You are the sky god of storms worshiped by the nomadic tribes . These people soon started to engage agricultural settlers who worshiped gods of the land and the sea, eventually subjugating them with overwhelming military might!"

'Kukuku... The weak should bow down to the strong. This is the truth of the world!'

"The gods of the land and the sea worshiped by farmers who lived in villages and towns, were indeed symbolized by the sacred beast, the [Dragon]. Hence, Baal, and equivalently Melqart, is the hunter of dragons!"

Emulating Verethragna, Godou spoke profound words. All this was for the sake of making the sword sharper and more effective.

"Becoming the enemy of settled peoples, you took on the appearance of a savage giant who vanquished dragons. Thereafter, the coarse savage began ruling as [King], as tyrannical as the storms. This is Baal, or in other words, Melqart's true nature!"

Godou yelled out the origins of the sky god before him and began manipulating the [Sword].

A portion of the golden light flew around its user, dancing haphazardly. The raging wind which should have blown Godou away was sliced apart, disappearing instantly.

The lightning and thunder that should have burnt Godou to a crisp, were also annihilated a hair's breadth away from him, leaving only the distinctive odors of ions.

"I am the strongest bearer of victory. Obstructions, be dismissed from my path!"

This time, Godou chanted Verethragna's scripture in order to attack.

Several dozen golden lights flew towards Melqart, aiming to slice apart the god's main body.

'Tsk!'

Fifteen-meter-tall Melqart took a flying leap. Despite his massive body, he was truly worthy of his title as the king of storms . As the wielder of agile wind and keen thunder, he dodged the spheres of light most splendidly.

Melqart proceeded to hover in the sky, shouting majestically.

'Very well, god-slayer! I too shall call upon my weapons to engage you who has drawn your sword. O Yagrush, O Ayamur, the cloud rider Baal summons you two!'

Responding to his commands, the magic club Yagrush flew out of empty space. Following in succession, the one flying out from the thunderclouds was naturally Ayamur.

These were the sacred weapons of Baal that had sent Godou to his grave the day before.

"Damn it... As expected, I can't win that easily!"

Godou smacked his lips. Melqart knew very well. When an enemy performs a threatening attack, one would be forced to concentrate on defense. If the god of storms fell for that, Godou would calmly attack with the [Sword] and slice through the enemy along with the defensive barrier. Hence, he did the opposite.

Not only did he eschew defense, Melqart went for offense instead. This in turn made Godou aware of his own need to defend .

'Yagrush the Chaser, Ayamur the Driver! Charging swiftly, flying swiftly, sweep everything away!'

"Evildoers shall never triumph over me! Tremble before the greatness of my strength!"

In order to control their respective loyal weapons, god and god-slayer chanted spell words simultaneously.

Part 5

Under Erica Blandelli's careful gaze, the battle was gradually approaching a climax.

'By my renown as the lion-hunting and dragon-slaying hero, I hereby command, fly across the sky!'

Melqart chanted spell words and brandished his weapons. Namely, violent wind and lightning.

With hurricane force, powerful gusts of wind rampaged and swept across Palermo's shore. Whether made of stone or steel-reinforced concrete, buildings creaked noisily under the strain. Cars parked on the roadside were blown tumbling while boats and ships moored at the pier were washed into the sea.

Furthermore, lightning continually shot out from the dark clouds, incinerating the land.

The next target of the raging wind and lightning, was naturally Kusanagi Godou. Like a massive tidal wave crashing down upon him, the wind and thunder rushed towards the youth who commanded thousands of star-like lights.

However, these spheres of light surrounding Godou did not lose to the raging wind and lightning.

Sparkling gems of light -- the [Sword] born from Verethragna's spell words flew around nimbly, tracing out radiant trails in the air .

Sliced by the brilliant spheres, the storm was instantly neutralized, returning to calm serenity.

The thunder was eviscerated in the same manner, and the temperature and impact of the lightning was rendered equally harmless.

The [Sword] successfully sealed away Melqart's authority. On further thought, these light spheres numbered over a thousand. Properly arranged into a defensive formation, they should be almost impenetrable.

When a swordsman held perfect defensive capabilities, it was standard procedure to patiently search for openings in the attacking side. Waiting for the attacker's momentum to subside,

and for attacks to wear out. But in the current situation, the presence of Yagrush and Ayamur did not allow Godou to do that.

The first club, Yagrush, was enveloped in gales.

Flying up, down, left, right, freely across the four cardinal directions, it attacked from all sides and angles like raging wind, trying to snipe Godou from a spot where the sword formation of light could not defend.

The second club, Ayamur, was shrouded in lightning.

Rapidly descending towards Godou in a straight line, it gave off intense heat like burning charcoal. Though its attack trajectory was simple and direct, it travelled extremely quickly, with lightning speed no matter how you looked at it.

"By these words of truth, I bestow protection upon myself. Know that I cannot be vanquished!"

Feeling slightly anxious, Godou composed spell words once again, desperately trying to endure.

Using several dozen spheres of the [Sword], Godou sealed off the path of Yagrush and its accompanying gales descending from behind, intending to overwhelm and slice it to pieces. However, the wind and the club soon penetrated the blades of light and returned to the sky.

Immediately after that, Ayamur came flying like lightning, prompting Godou to attempt to eliminate it with a counterattack.

However, it too failed to be sliced. Instead, Ayamur was deflected by the [Sword] and sent flying back like a tennis ball which had been struck by a racquet.

"Guh--!"

Yagrush and Ayamur's offensive powers transcended ordinary wind and thunder.

Godou endured it all. The weapon he controlled was not a real sword but a magical blade constructed from spell words.

"...Perhaps a Campione's authority manifests in a form that is most natural for the possessor to control."

Erica murmured to herself. The Eastern European Devil King, Marquis Voban, started out completely unversed in martial arts and magic, just like Godou. Nevertheless, he fought like a ferocious beast by summoning packs of demonic wolves using his [Legion of Hungry Wolves] authority, even turning himself into a wolf.

That took place in the first half of the nineteenth century.

At the time, there existed mercenary teams of magi who relied on flame magic and the latest firearms and weaponry to obtain great firepower. They were active as soldiers in the special forces of various powerful nations. And the one who exterminated them all, was Marquis Voban during his days as a youth.

In addition, a mysterious war god had descended somewhere in Europe during that time.

In order to slaughter the god's sacred forces, the Marquis had gathered his own demonic army under his command.

Nicknamed the "King of Wisdom," the elderly Campione repeatedly engaged in intense and bloody battles against his peers. It was a legend established in a matter of years by a vagabond youth.

Currently, Erica could very well be witnessing the opening scene of a similar story.

As the protagonist of the current story, Godou was desperately defending against Melqart's attacks. However, signs of anxiety could be seen from the side of his face. It was perfectly clear from his expression.

As much as she wished to deny it, perhaps certain bonds were solidifying between the two of them for some reason.

Precisely because of this, right?

Without any other choice, she had undertaken the ritual of [Instruction] together with him. In response to Godou's demands, Erica had immersed herself in the required behavior. Simply recalling the event was enough to make her cheeks hot.

"It was a mistake that happened in the heat of the moment due to those circumstances. Regardless, as the one who became the seventh Campione, he is not a man suitable for Erica Blandelli..."

As Erica grumbled to herself, she focused her attention on the battle once more.

With many dangerously close encounters, Godou continued to defend against Melqart's wind and thunder as well as the attacks conducted by Yagrush and Ayamur. However, Erica was certain.

He was getting anxious after all. In addition, he seemed to be hesitating over something--!

The instant she realized, Erica had already summoned Cuore di Leone into her right hand.

At the same time, her surcoat also manifested and wrapped around her. This sacred protective garment, patterned with rossonero stripes, was only allowed to be worn by great knights of the [Copper Black Cross].

"Clearly you are already a god-slayer, but why do you still keep bringing trouble to others!?"

For some reason, Erica actually felt happy about this.

The gales and thunder on the battlefield were as turbulent as whitewater rapids. Nevertheless, she advanced towards the youth in the very center. Even if she could not reach his side, it was sufficient as long as she could get within hearing distance.

The brave smile of a lioness flashed spectacularly across her face for an instant.

"As expected of a god, this won't be easy to finish..."

Godou muttered to himself.

Were Melqart's attacks limited to wind and lightning, defending would not be too difficult. But Yagrush and Ayamur, lying in wait using the storm for cover, were truly terrifying. It was completely impossible to predict when or where the two magic clubs would suddenly attack.

'Chaser and Driver, pursue with all your might! May the ocean be exiled, and even the sea currents crushed!'

Melqart stood upright within the storm, composing spell words.

In response to his summons, wind and thunder sprang into action, as Yagrush and Ayamur continued to fly in the sky.

To protect himself from the attacks of the two clubs, Godou kept using the [Sword] for defense.

His manner of control was completely self-styled. As Yagrush came flying in a circular trajectory -- this could be considered the " ball" while the numerous blades of light acted as the "glove."

Vivid images of catching penetrating batted balls surfaced in memory.

Thus, the [Sword] moved swiftly and blocked Yagrush splendidly.

Immediately, lightning-powered Ayamur flew with amazing speed.

This recalled impressions of batting against pitches of strong fastballs. Similarly, the [Sword] spectacularly struck the lightning-speed club squarely, sending it rebounding with a clang.

"Well, it's not too different from baseball after all..."

Godou knew this was simply his nonsensical comparison, but it turned out to be surprisingly effective. However, another emerging problem could not be ignored. The blades of spell words were gradually decreasing in number.

It was like a bladed tool which dulled with each use--!

At the beginning, there were roughly a thousand spheres of light, but now only about half remained. He definitely had to switch to offense before all the light spheres disappeared.

However, Melqart was also initiating even more intense assaults. Raging wind and lighting began a boisterous dance. Furthermore, Yagrush and Ayamur which hounded Godou towards his demise, were attacking with ever increasing ferocity.

Godou understood he was being cornered.

Don't panic, there's still room left to maneuver. Now was the time to find a way to counterattack. Godou suppressed his anxiety and tried to convince himself. However, there was yet another problem.

The authority Godou had usurped from Verethragna should be the [Ten Incarnations]. But once used, each incarnation became temporarily unavailable.

If his tactics required using another incarnation to break out of the current situation, it meant abandoning the iron defense provided by the [Sword]!

"Kukuku... Your [Sword] sure is troublesome, brat!"

Also, Melqart was laughing loudly as he spoke.

"Yagrush and Ayamur are the divine artifacts forged by the god of craftsmen, Kothar-wa-Khasis.[11] These weapons which I wield, are also infused with that god's divine qualities! Hence, the spell words you brat has prepared -- the spell words meant for slicing Melqart only cannot sever them!"

So that was the reason! Godou was immensely surprised, then he nodded.

Unbelievable indeed. He had wondered why it took so much effort to deflect Yagrush and Ayamur when the [Sword] clearly dispelled wind and lightning without issue.

"If the true wielder Verethragna was here instead, he would have added the spell words for slaying Kothar-wa-Khasis and broken my weapons like he did during our previous battle. Hoho... That must be beyond your limits, brat!"

Melqart's observation of his immaturity invaded Godou's heart with anxiety.

There was still a way to reverse the tides of battle. However, abandoning the [Sword] felt rather frightening. Continuing to fight without it would be quite difficult. What should he do!?

Just at that moment, he heard Erica shouting.

"Godou! I don't know what you're hesitating about, but please go ahead!"

She was clad in the familiar red and black cape, magic sword in hand.

"Charging forward in a duel leads to a knight's victory! It is fine to fear the enemy, but if you stop moving forward because you fear failure, only death awaits you!"

As if trying not to lose her voice in the storm, Erica yelled desperately.

"Have no fear. You still have me, Erica Blandelli! So what if your opponent is a [Heretic God]? Before you collapse exhausted, I will protect you! So go on and advance forward! You -- will definitely not lose, right?"

Godou's entire body reawakened the heat he had felt when his lips were intimately locked with Erica's.

That's right. If I falter now, I will break my promise. Also I've forgotten. I still have a "partner" here who could very well be my goddess of victory!

"I am the strongest, crushing all who stand in my way!"

Godou yelled out spell words, infusing the [Sword] with magical power. Through this battle, he had managed to learn how to control magical power.

"For Verethragna's glorious victory, O Sword, slay all evildoers! "

He accelerated all of the remaining golden brilliance of the [Sword]. After all, since its numbers were gradually decreasing, it would be best to make effective use while there was still sufficient sharpness. Thanks to Erica, Godou was able to act decisively.

"Disregard Yagrush and Ayamur! Target Melqart's storm -- Eliminate it!"

The [Sword]'s hundreds of lights that had been shining in Godou's surroundings like stars up until now, now moved all at once.

Arching across the sky like a shooting star at night, it sliced apart giant Melqart's abdomen.

'Guh -- uwaaaah!"

Screaming, Melqart crashed down from the stormy skies.

Nevertheless, this wound from the sword was still far from fatal . The violent giant god twisted and turned his body in an unsightly manner, but managed to land on his feet. Still, Godou did not despair.

He already knew. This [Sword] was not powerful enough for a death blow.

Instead, its true value lay in its situational adaptability and unified combination of offense and defense.

For example, even though it could not slay Melqart, the [Sword] was able to eliminate his [Storms] authority, temporarily rendering it powerless--

As a result of this slicing attack, the sword Godou created had completely disappeared.

In exchange, the storm and lightning were completely pacified. Thunderclouds immediately scattered, revealing the sunny blue sky.

Temporarily, Melqart was no longer the [God of Storms]. Even though he would probably recover in half a day or a few hours, the troublesome [Storms] authority should be sealed for now.

'How infuriating! Nevertheless, I still have these two possessions. O Yagrush, O Ayamur, take that god-slayer--"

Melqart readied his stance and yelled. However, Godou had already taken the next step.

"So says Lord Mithra. The sinful shall be met with justice. May spines be crushed, may bones be broken, tendons torn; hair, brains, and blood mingled and trampled together with the earth."

Spell words naturally flowed from his mouth to suit the situation. Furthermore, the dark beast hidden in his heart cried out in delight.

"I am the one unblunted and unapproachable! By Lord Mithra's command, you shall find ruination at the hands of the beast!"

As soon as Godou finished reciting the scripture of destruction..
.

Pitch-black darkness suddenly manifested beside Melqart.

This dark shadow, spewing crimson flames, took on the form of a [Boar] within the blink of an eye.

The incarnation of the [Boar] that could only be used with the intent of demolishing a massive target. Roughly 20m in length, its vigorous and strongly built body was covered with pitch-black fur. In addition, its two tusks protruded forward like sharp spears.

For the sake of trampling Melqart to death, Godou had summoned the ferocious divine beast!

Part 6

With that, the battle situation completely changed.

Until this moment, it had been a wild tango between wind, thunder and blades of light filling the sky, a most extraordinary shooting match. But now, it became a direct confrontation between a majestic giant and a black beast, like a fight scene in a special effects presentation.[12]

'O Yagrush, O Ayamur, return to my hands!'

ROOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAR!!

Howling, the giant and the ferocious gigantic beast engaged in a head on fight.

The beautiful seaside streets of the ancient Sicilian capital stood as the backdrop to the battlefield.

Displaying his skills as a fearless warrior, Melqart wielded Yagrush in his right hand with Ayamur in his left. Swinging his heavy clubs as swiftly as the wind, he attacked ferociously with lightning speed.

In turn, the [Boar] dodged the attacks with keen and nimble movements.

It, too, displayed speed incommensurate with its gigantic body. This was indeed a wild beast's swiftness, evading enemy attacks with suave motions then gearing up for a charging strike.

The [Boar] was truly amazing. The exceptionally terrifying charge of a boar.

Noisily kicking against the ground (more accurately it was the road), it dashed on a violent collision course with explosive speed. Its two spear-like tusks smashed towards Melqart's body.

Melqart attacked in return.

Spinning his magic clubs for a counterattack, he jumped sideways to evade and wrapped his arms around the [Boar]'s neck in a wrestling-style grapple.

Nevertheless, the [Boar] had not lost yet.

The counterattacking clubs violently struck the divine beast's pitch black head with a loud crash.

The [Boar] endured the impact with its sturdy boar skull and gigantic body, continuing to charge. Though Melqart's clubs were not shattered in the collision, they were sent flying back. Flying high in the sky, the weapons immediately returned to their master's hands.

Melqart once again attempted a wrestling hold, but the [Boar] twisted its black gigantic body and struggled free.

The tides of battle swayed back and forth. However, both participants seemed immensely excited.

'Kukuku... Very well. Long it has been, since my blood boiled with such excitement! Truly, only this sort of battle provides any satisfaction! Give me all you've got!'

The ancient Phoenician divine king laughed with exhilaration and cast off his only piece of presentable attire, flinging the mantle away. Clad in a leather breastplate, loincloth and sandals, he would be better described as an uncouth savage rather than a king.

In response, the [Boar] also roared in a conspicuously excited voice.

ROOOOOOOOOAAAAAAR!

'Fuyaaaaaaaaah!"

With every roar, destruction was wrought to the surroundings.

Melqart launched Yagrush and Ayamur at the same time. In order to dodge this attack, the [Boar] pounced ferociously and collided with the sky god's giant body.

Having lost their target, the two magic clubs demolished several buildings instead.

Melqart flexed the bulging muscles all over his body and caught the [Boar]'s charge with cries of 'Oomph!' while being pushed back by the seemingly unstoppable momentum. With the sound of noisy clattering, stylish houses of stone were crushed in their wake .

But Melqart then grabbed the [Boar], picking it up and throwing its massive body onto the road. Cars and trucks parked there were swept into the turmoil and sent flying.

"T-They've gone into the streets. This is really out of control!"

"The residents have all evacuated. How fortunate."

Godou and Erica watched the destruction of the beautiful Sicilian streets facing the sea.

The two of them distanced themselves from the main road where the intense close quarters battle was taking place and moved into the yacht harbor near the sea. As a side note, of the dozens of yachts normally moored there, almost all of them had already been washed away by the storm just now.

Nevertheless, distancing themselves from the battle did not mean they were safe.

"Look over at the sea, Godou!"

Prompted by Erica's warning, Godou was rendered speechless by what he saw over the sea. Not only was the horizon enshrouded by black mist, this mist was also advancing inland from the sea with frightening speed.

'God-slayer! Battling your underling has brought me much joy!'

Melqart's booming voice came from the main road.

'But let's not forget about you. Since you have unleashed a divine beast, it is only fitting for me to call forth my servants.'

The black mist had already reached within ten-odd meters of the pier.

An unpleasant buzzing troubled the ears. Was this the sound of wings? Godou figured it out. That was no mist -- it was a swarm of locusts!

This mist gathered massive numbers of locusts, a swarm hundreds of thousands strong.

"I get it now. Melqart can command locusts. Now that I recall, he did that on Sardinia too."

Excessively large swarms of locusts would devour crops and bring famine--

Before modern times, these pests frequently appeared in swarms with sizes on the order of ten billion. If the current hundreds of thousands of locusts fed on them, Godou and Erica would be dead for sure. But now that the [Sword] was no longer available, Godou had no weapon to protect them.

In that case, Melqart must be defeated before that insect swarm arrived!

"The bearer of sharp tusks! Killing with one stroke, trampling foes to dust!"

Godou infused the [Boar] with all his magical power. The divine beast's enormous body became covered with blue flames and began to burn intensely.

'Oh? Trying to settle the match now? Most amusing!'

Melqart greatly flexed his bulging mighty muscles in turn.

Crossing the magic clubs Yagrush and Ayamur before him in an X-shape, he prepared a stance to receive the attack. On the other hand, the [Boar], burning with blue flames, charged forward at full speed.

With speed like lightning.

In addition, sonic waves were created by the giant galloping body, sending surrounding buildings and vehicles flying. The [Boar] unleashed the greatest power it had ever displayed. Be that as it may, Godou realized he was too naive.

To think Melqart happened to see through the [Boar]'s ridiculous charge, and nimbly jumped back into the sky to evade.

Up until now, Melqart had been "using strength in response to strength."

This befitted his image of the savage warrior, thereby causing Godou to be misled by preconceptions, thinking he would continue to respond using the same tactics.

But at this critical decisive moment, Melqart flew as light as the wind to evade the [Boar]'s attack.

Hence, the black divine beast continued charging forward, smashing violently into the great gate behind its prey.

That was the Porta Felice.

A massive stone-built gate with intricate carvings.

Even though it was called a gate, in actual fact it was a sixteenth century structure better described as two towers standing on opposite sides of the road.

In days past, this was considered the entrance to the city of Palermo from the harbor.

Struck by the charging massive body, the gates were naturally demolished.

'Hahahaha! Immature as expected, god-slayer. Sticking your neck out like this before you clearly discern your opponent's power!'

Hovering high in the air, Melqart ridiculed as he launched Yagrush and Ayamur.

ROOOOOAAAAAAAAAR!

For the very first time, Godou heard the [Boar] screaming in pain. After being dealt heavy blows in the head by the first club and in the back by the second, the divine beast lay sprawled on the ground.

Melqart landed majestically beside it, his giant body appearing to be unrealistically light.

Meanwhile, the [Boar] desperately tried to get up but could not. Its black front legs scratching noisily against the road surface, its struggles were in vain. The damage inflicted by Yagrush and Ayamur just now was too severe.

Furthermore, the hundreds of thousands of locusts had already reached the pier where Godou and Erica were located.

Whenever these pests appeared in great numbers, they became great disasters that could bring countries to ruin. Using their tiny but sharp jaws, they would devour all vegetation from fertile fields .

In addition, this massive swarm of locusts was being commanded by Melqart.

This insect swarm of death embodied his aspect as a god of destruction. Whether iron or concrete, everything targeted would be devoured in entirety.

How could this crisis be overcome!? Just as Godou's back was drenched in cold sweat...

"Eli Eli lama sabachthani? Oh Lord, why hast thou forsaken me? "[13]

Erica raised her voice and chanted.

This was her trump card, the spell words she had used during the battle against Verethragna.

"O my God, I cry in the day time, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent. But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel!"[14]

These were apparently the Golgotha spell words. It was said that Jesus expressed his despair and praised God the Father through this song of demise just before his execution.

Godou could feel his surroundings filled with the terrifying " aura" of anguish and despair.

"O my strength, haste thee to help me! I will declare thy name unto my brethren: in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee."[15]

When weapons were infused with the Golgotha spell words, even gods could be harmed--

Before the battle against Verethragna, Erica had mentioned once .

Then surely this was it. Just as Godou imagined, Erica raised the magic sword Cuore di Leone towards the sky. With its slender and beautiful silver blade like a work of art, the sword absorbed the Golgotha spell words.

Furthermore, Erica's chanting of spell words did not end there.

"For the sake of maintaining order in Rome, the Senate decreed the suspension of imperium! Senatus consultum ultimum, hereby decreed!"[16]

She proceeded to deploy the strongest defensive magic.

Infused with the Golgotha spell words, Cuore di Leone changed from a magic sword into the form of a chain. Coiling around like a great serpent, it traced out a spiral trail around Godou and Erica.

Transformed into a spiraling magical chain, it stood upright like an impenetrable iron fortress.

This should protect them from the giant swarm of locusts!

Arranged in a spiral, the chain was shrouded in blue-white lightning. Accompanied by noisy explosions of sparks, the biting locusts were all repelled.

"I will endure for now but it can't be sustained for long. Godou, please defeat Melqart before my barrier breaks!"

"Uh yeah."

Given their desperately unfavorable conditions, to think Erica would even talk about reversal.

Nevertheless, Godou nodded at her words. There were no viable options other than that.

"So, how long can you endure for...?"

"As much as I'd like to say forever, considering they are servants summoned directly by a god, at the current numbers -- two minutes should be the limit? Even though it works as a trump card against those of Bianchi's caliber, the current situation is on a completely different level."

Erica's tone of voice was very calm.

However, she was probably pretending. With mere minutes remaining, moreover with her life entrusted to someone else, it should be impossible to maintain composure.

As Godou silently stared at her, Erica displayed a fearless smile.

But just as he suspected, she lacked a little of her usual glamor and it felt a little forced.

"I am not the type to plan out my life to the last detail. Nevertheless, having my life cut short at this young age would truly be unexpected. My future, Erica Blandelli's, may I entrust it to you?"

This beautiful girl had already become Godou's closest relation, more important than anyone else apart from family.

Godou forced himself to rouse his spirits. In that case, he had no choice but to act. The fate of this city of Palermo, and even Erica's life, all depended on him.

Hence, he could not give up. Stop wavering over this or that, just rush forward powered by spirit!

"Yeah, I will stay by your side even to the grave. Leave everything to me."

"Wow, how rare it is to actually hear reliable words from you. Then I shall believe in you -- Ah, just to be safe, I must clarify beforehand!"

Erica suddenly cried out as if she had realized certain meanings.

"When I talked about entrusting my future to you, I didn't mean anything special, okay? Definitely nowhere analogous to 'for better , for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death us do part' or anything like that! Are you clear on that!?"

"Uh yeah. Of course. That notion couldn't possibly have occurred to me, right?"

As the two conversed, the mist-like swarm of locusts gathered, trying to attack them.

Blocking them was the spiral barrier of the chain which gave off electrical shock and heat.

Meanwhile, located on the main road were Melqart who had landed and the captured [Boar]. Nonchalantly, the divine king sent swift and fierce kicks into the back of the giant beast that lay sprawling on the ground.

Uwooooooooooooooh! The [Boar]'s grievous roars resounded all around.

'Hoo... Isn't this a fitting end, divine beast! Prepare to die!'

Melqart declared as he landed vicious punches and kicks on the [Boar].

The black divine beast curled its legs as it lay on the ground. It did this to protect its soft underbelly and endured Melqart's attacks with its back.

Then the divine king summoned his two clubs that had been flying in the air. Brandishing Yagrush in his left hand and Ayamur in his right, he started a new round of ever fiercer attacks on the [Boar]'s back.

His entire body bulging with muscles, the half-naked man tormented the struggling beast--

Such savagery was evocative of a Stone Age hunting scenario.

Melqart did not even throw Godou a single glance. He could not be that careless and complacent, right? But in any case, currently trapped by this swarm of locusts, Godou was facing a desperate crisis on his own end of things.

Under such conditions, how could Melqart be defeated!?

Godou desperately searched his mind. However, it seemed like a fruitless waste of time.

"Only thirty seconds left until the limit. You'd better be prepared, Godou!"

Erica finally announced that time was running out.

The spiral chain protected them from the massive swarm of locusts that were like a cloud. However, cracks were starting to appear all over the chain, and its imminent shattering was plain to see.

Godou at this time, decided to embrace his fate with open arms -- he had done everything he could possibly do.

Taking a deep breath, he relaxed his shoulders. There was nothing to be anxious about. Pondering in these most final of final moments, he shifted his gaze.

Quietly, he looked up at the sky. Previously, his view of the sky above had been obscured by the spiral chain and the swarm of locusts.

The sun that he had not seen for days, was clearly shining with such brilliant radiance... The sun?

Come to think of it--

Warlord Verethragna was the heavenly child of the sun. A fact that he had forgotten completely. It was precisely by stealing his flames using the [Secret Tome of Prometheus] that Godou was able to make his final attack to defeat the god.

"If that's the case, that must naturally be amongst the ten incarnations, right?"

He understood the instant he noticed the fact. The sacred beast that carried the sun's radiance.

Furthermore, there was no issue with usage conditions. Godou nodded.

"As befitted a god of justice... The only permitted targets of the [White Stallion] are great sinners who have brought suffering to the people."

"Eh? What's going on?"

"I'll explain to you later. But before that..."

Sustaining the spiral chain, Erica questioned with a murmur.

Keeping the answer for later, Godou turned his attention to the battle between the two giant bodies.

He transmitted his intentions to the [Boar] which was being kicked and pounded fiercely by Melqart like a punching bag.

--Beaten up like this, can you hold on further?

If you can do that, I will surely vanquish your enemy.

In that very instant, Godou understood.

The [Boar]'s eyes seemed to be saying "Don't underestimate me" as they flashed brilliantly. Even though the black divine beast was lying on the ground on its last breath, it still bit Melqart in the ankle.

'Hahahaha! How terribly feeble, where has your spirit from just now gone off to!?'

Even though he was bitten, Melqart laughed as if it completely did not hurt.

Furthermore, he used his free leg to kick the [Boar]'s face. The black divine beast could no longer endure and fell backwards, releasing the ankle it had been biting.

'Praiseworthy are you, wild beast! You have done well, facing Melqart in battle. Kukuku, long it has been since I last hunted, it is truly exhilarating to exert myself and toil with sweat!'

Melqart threw down Yagrush and Ayamur.

Using his strong arms to wrap around the [Boar]'s torso, he lifted it high like a wooden bucket -- pouring forth all his strength. Purely with arm strength, he crushed his enemy's spine. This would be called a bear hug in wrestling.

RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH! The [Boar] screamed loudly and tragically.

This was the moment Godou had been waiting for, when Melqart was exerting his entire body's strength to send the divine beast to its grave. Seizing this opportunity to attack, he would prevent Melqart from evading as before!

"For victory, hasten forth before me... O Immortal Sun, I beseech thee to grant radiance to the stallion. O Stallion that moveth

godlike with wondrous grace, bringest forth the halo of thy master --"

Words that came forth from his mouth like mutterings at first.

In the end, they were recited sonorously as if they concealed a sun within them.

Under Godou's gaze as he chanted, the [Boar] lost its form and dissipated like mist. In order to switch incarnations to the [White Stallion], it could no longer be sustained.

The white stallion, which acted as the sun's transport, was Verethragna's third incarnation.

East of Godou and Erica's location -- on the horizon across the sea, appeared golden brilliance.

A second sun.

During times of dawn, the sun rising in the east would illuminate the land with a rosy color. Now, the same glorious and dazzling radiance was shining at Palermo from across the Mediterranean.

Then the second sun released a "white spear of light."

Stellar atmospheres would occasionally erupt with explosions known as flares. The incarnation of the [White Stallion] was the ultimate technique which shot out white flames from the eastern sky equivalent to solar flares.

Naturally, the target was Melqart whose great storm had tormented the populace.

'Nugaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!'

Flying from the eastern sky, the brilliant spear of solar flare streaked across the heavens. Shrouded in apocalyptic white conflagration, this time it was the sky god's turn to emit cries of pain.

In a fully ready state, Melqart might have been able to defend against these flames.

But just as expected, he could hardly accomplish that in his bear hug posture.

Sparks fell down upon Godou as he nodded.

Melqart was visible amidst the scorching white flames of conflagration. Godou issued the command "Come!"

"Erica, release the chains. Jump into the sea!"

"--Yes, acknowledged!"

His "partner" immediately responded to his sudden orders.

The descending sparks were all dying embers, but Melqart's locusts were instantly incinerated on contact and vaporized.

Watching this unfold, Erica released the spiral chain.

At the same time, she and Godou ran at full speed towards the sea. A portion of the locusts attempted to pursue, but were blocked by sparks and combusted.

Immediately after the pair had leaped into the Bay of Palermo--

The [White Stallion]'s apocalyptic conflagration that was incinerating Melqart like a furnace, spread all the way to the yacht harbor where Godou and Erica had been staying just now. In an instant, the great swarm of locusts was completely vaporized, tens of thousands at a time.

Part 7

It took so long before the fire completely subsided -- Godou had been secretly worrying.

As befitted something produced from an authority. These phenomena, ridiculous beyond belief, vanished after a mere ten-odd minutes. Furthermore, no leftover heat remained where the incineration had taken place.

Godou floated back to near the yacht harbor.

The gentle touch of the mild breeze caressing his face was like the Mediterranean spring. Compared to the hot winds blowing forth from scene of the blazing furnace, it was like the difference between heaven and hell.

Godou nodded in agreement as Erica signaled to him with her eyes as she floated beside him.

Having made their decision, they returned to the shore.

"What should I say, this is quite terrifying..."

"Let me make this clear beforehand, this was virtually all of your own doing."

Erica offered her commentary as Godou exclaimed.

This was the main road that extended across the shore of the Mediterranean. Rather fitting for this Sicilian ancient capital on the seaside, it used to be a peaceful street where people had always lived in happiness amidst the clear blue sky and ocean.

However--

There were numerous cases of steel-frame or stone-built structures, as well as road asphalt, with signs of scorching from the solar flare. Those still retained their basic forms. Nevertheless, their outlines were uneven like glass which had melted and re-solidified.

Naturally, flammable objects such as trees on the roads were completely wiped out.

The tourist attraction of Porta Felice which acted as the entrance to Corso Vittorio Emanuele and had just been damaged by the [Boar], had now completely collapsed.

"Even if someone said that a fragment of the sun had descended upon here a hundred years ago, it would still be possible someone might believe that..."

After witnessing the results of using his divine power, Godou clutched his head in his arms.

What on earth have I done? Feelings of shame and regret overwhelmed him like raging waves of the ocean. The only fortunate thing was that Melqart and the massive swarm of locusts had been destroyed--

Just at that instant, Godou's entire body suddenly experienced intense heat and shock, and then he was blown away.

Damaged as if he had just been struck by a tank round. No good, I can't stand anymore, nor can I lift a finger. Slowly, his consciousness began to fade.

Don't die at least, I'll have to rely on the [Ram]...

It had only been mere days since he became a Campione, but thanks to experiencing real combat many times, Godou had already familiarized himself with the use of his authority.

"Could this be Your Highness -- King Melqart!?"

What had just struck Godou suddenly was the flying club Ayamur.

Earlier on, the club had been sized in proportion for giant Melqart to wield, but now it had shrunk to dimensions for a normal human's use--

Erica looked in shock at the direction from where the club had come flying.

A ball of thunder was hovering over Via Cala which was half-melted by the white solar flare. Noisily giving off weak blue-white sparks, it was a sphere of plasma.

Erica realized. Just now, the [White Stallion] had not defeated Melqart completely!

Apparently he had lost his material body, but his ectoplasm still survived--

'True... Indeed it is I. To think I would be defeated by the brat this time!'

The thunder replied with Melqart's voice and solemnity.

'Hmph, I don't know if my anger could be quelled by eliminating the war god of the cheap little tricks. To think he would show such a foolish opening. Whatever, even considering that failing, he has done rather well...'

"Does Your Highness intend to kill Kusanagi Godou?"

Erica questioned the majestic god. Once again, she summoned the steel of the lion, Cuore di Leone, in the form of the magic sword. If that was what the divine king of storms intended, she would have no choice but to pit her life against him...

'Indeed that is precisely my wish. Regrettably, that attack just now has depleted my remaining strength. For now, I cannot do anything apart from hovering like this in the air!'

Had the thunder possessed a material body, it probably would have snorted with its nose.

The atmosphere was thick with anger and frustration.

'The sort of misbegotten fate which would bring us together for a future rematch once my body is restored, does not exist between this brat and me. Well, this time is my loss -- no, it is a draw!'

Changing his sentence midway clearly displayed the god's competitive and defiant personality.

This was Melqart's verdict.

Erica relaxed her shoulders and felt relieved.

Even though he had lost his material body, he was still a god. Whether fighting or running away from him, it would be rather difficult for Godou and Erica who had no strength left to spare. A ceasefire would be the best thing for now.

'So, I shall be gone. It is uncertain if fate shall cross our paths or when I shall encounter that brat again in the future -- it will happen when it happens. I will take care of the future properly!'

As the wind began to blow, the talking thunder flew off.

Left behind were Erica Blandelli and the young unconscious god-slayer. A situation extremely similar to the one a few days ago .

Godou was sleeping in order to revive, with no one to protect him apart from her.

Noticing this coincidence, Erica lifted and supported the sleeping youth's head.

"...Well fought, Godou. This is now my reward bestowed to you . I will never do this ever again, especially when you are conscious. So please, rest properly for now."

As if trying not to disturb the youth's slumber, Erica spoke softly with gentle tones as she served as his lap pillow.

Chapter 4 - Deep Yet Brief Slumber

Part 1

With the beginning of the new school term, two weeks had already passed.

"How peaceful..."

Godou yawned casually.

He was currently on the roof of Jounan Private Academy's high school division. Even though it was the lunch break and there were many other students, the roof was still far from crowded.

Plus the fact of today's fine weather, with the sunlight and gentle breeze streaming over the roof, made for a rather pleasant experience.

"With all that behind me, the utter chaos that occurred during spring break almost seems unreal..."

Perhaps because he had been an athlete since childhood, Godou was a rather proactive person who got things done.

But currently he was idling around uncharacteristically. Resting against the roof fence, he casually sucked coffee-flavored milk from a drink carton. Ever since returning from Italy, he had been stuck in this sort of state.

Perhaps a result of his intense experiences in foreign lands, he found himself unable to adjust to the pace of his new life...

That's right. New life. Having passed April, Kusanagi Godou was now a first year high school student.

Though Jounan Academy's high school division was considered the type of school that guaranteed promising university prospects, it was surprisingly lax.

Thanks to the freedom of the school culture, school rules were not particularly strict, nor were students studying themselves to death. Club activities offered opportunities to interact with the university division, and consequently, for better or worse, these " seniors" would often take their juniors out to have fun. On the other hand, the encouragement of sports was nonexistent.

This sort of freedom which completely relied on students' self-management, was probably closer to a university in style.

Compared to sports, more diverse and varied cultural club activities were offered.

Last year when the cheerleading club attended the national convention, they were given a blessing of "the sports clubs returning to the national arena after an absence of ten years!" The rest of the state of affairs could be surmised from that.

It was this kind of school. As usual, Godou still belonged to the "go home" club.

Lazily passing his lunch breaks, he would blankly plod his way through the afternoon lessons then go home immediately after school.

"Onii-chan, you still haven't decided on club activities?"

Sipping tea in the living room, Shizuka asked when she returned home from school.

Not especially tall but very adorable in appearance, she was a very likable little sister enhanced by her trait of surprising defiance .

"Yeah, because there's no club I especially want to join."

"Sigh, I guess our school really doesn't have a sports club that Onii-chan can enjoy if you're serious... On the other hand, the cheerleading and ballroom dance clubs seem to be quite amazing."

Shizuka nodded as she spoke. Having passed the middle school entrance examinations to enter Jounan Academy, the little sister was currently a second year student in the middle school division. Hence, Godou was also her senior as a student in the Academy.

"Anyway, the baseball club is so weak it's not even funny."

"That's interesting, but it's fine anyway."

"Perhaps, if I had to make a recommendation, it would be the cultural clubs. Amongst them are some rather weird ones, it's actually quite interesting. In any case, no matter which club, you should still join one. It's not good for a person to be idle."

"Really?"

Even urged by Shizuka, Godou was not really convinced.

"It's not like I have to join a club no matter what. There's no need to hurry. In my class, there are many other people in the 'go home' club."

"Other people are other people. Onii-chan is Onii-chan."

Rudely pointing her index finger at her brother and senior, Shizuka declared crisply.

"This is advice for Onii-chan's own good. It was the same with Grandfather, after he resigned his job at the university, he became even worse than before. If you continue to idle about, it is very likely you'll become a genuine good-for-nothing!"

Grandfather -- Kusanagi Ichirou once taught folkloristics in university.

His specialty should be Japanese and worldwide arts and traditions. He was the legal guardian who attentively looked after the sibling pair of Godou and Shizuka in place of their busy parents. At the same time, he was also a man exceptionally wise in the pleasures of life.

Not exactly idle hands.

Only because he was rather skilled in various forms of pleasures, he was renowned as a "connoisseur" or "celebrity" to many people. To elaborate, "pleasures" referred to drinking, banquets, traveling, socializing, artistic accomplishments, and most importantly, the ability to build relations with a specified (rather than unspecified) large number of women.

Meanwhile, the little sister who was trying to remonstrate her older brother, was a member of the tea ceremony club.

Even within the boundaries of the high school division, Godou had spotted Shizuka once. She was probably in the middle of club activities after school. Girls from both the high and middle school divisions had gathered together to move cardboard boxes.

During the brief encounter, Godou had waved "Hi" to greet.

Shizuka also waved lightly in return.

...Come to think of it, there was also a high school girl whose beauty was absolutely stunning -- a pretty girl with heavily brown-tinted hair who left him with a deep impression. She had quietly greeted him with refined gentleness. Intimidated by such beauty, Godou even failed to catch a serious glimpse of her face...

In any case, in the two weeks since school started, Kusanagi Godou had been in the "go home" club all along.

"I hereby declare the founding of the [Imaginary Date Club]. Comrades, rise and gather forth!"

"Stop talking nonsense! *Moe* is born from DVDs and hard disks. Try as you may to fill the gap with imaginary delusions, humans have limitations!"

In Godou's First Year Fifth Class, male students named Nanami and Sorimachi were engaged in some kind of strange club activities, arguing for some inexplicable reason. Godou simply ignored the noisy racket.

Incredibly, after returning from Italy, things around him seemed to lack a sense of concrete reality.

By the time he noticed, his right shoulder could now swivel and move freely somehow.

The shoulder that was injured during the summer of his third year in middle school and his reason for quitting baseball, had unexpectedly recovered. Consequently, that path remained open for him to pursue once more.

Nevertheless, a recent event had already robbed Godou of this choice.

It was the night just before the last day of spring break.

"Since the new school term is starting, this kind of chance will be rare from now on."

Thus declared Miura, Godou's middle school rival and baseball teammate.

This happened on the sports ground of a certain middle school in the Tokyo special ward of Kita. During the day, Miura had phoned to say "To celebrate this bro's graduation, you have to come along."

Miura was a fastball pitcher nicknamed the strong-armed. Furthermore, he was an extremely pushy kind of fellow.

From his extensive experience as a catcher, Godou knew many pitchers who were conceited enough to call themselves "this bro" as well as others who were unexpectedly delicate. Unfortunately, Miura belonged 100% in the former camp.

However, this was precisely how the current situation arose.

Gathered in front of the middle school Miura was graduating from, they illegally trespassed by climbing over the school walls.

The perpetrators were Godou, Rui, Nakayama and Miura. Everyone lived in the north of Tokyo and had been mighty baseball champs who competed in matches of the Tokyo Selection and World Series. Though they had belonged to different teams, there were often times when they had to cooperate competitively. These were comrades linked by an incredible sense of solidarity.

"...So, why have you called us here today?"

Rui was the one questioning. Though not particularly tall, he was an infielder and first hitter with outstanding sharp senses.

He was clearly a boy but possessed a cute and well-proportioned face.

"What, starting this year, this bro will be courageously advancing towards victory in the National High School Baseball Championship. Before the new term starts, it'd be nice to hear you guys cheering and showing support."

"...Can I go now? There's something on television."

Nakayama grumbled to the willful one who invited them.

A man of few words with an appearance like a vagabond warrior. His physique was tall and slim, but he was quite a strong long range hitter.

"Yeah, I've been asked by people at the amateur baseball club to help out tomorrow. So I'd like to go to bed a bit earlier tonight."

"If you guys are going, I'm off too."

As soon as Rui stated indifferently, Godou concurred as well. That would be the plan.

"Tsk, stop saying such heartless things! Guys, aren't you all giving up on baseball!? That's why I wanted to invite you all out here while there's still time! Can't you guys act a bit kinder?"

Miura yelled. Come on, man, who wouldn't want others to treat them nicer?

Somehow these words did not sound annoying. Unexpectedly, he gave off an impression like a bullied victim.

Nakayama turned back from his exit while Rui smiled wryly and Godou shrugged. For various reasons, these three had intended to abandon baseball in high school.

Only Miura entered a school renowned for strength in baseball. Perhaps he would be immersed in training all year along, sweating like rain even on weekends. Indeed, today was probably the only chance for them to get together again.

Due to this, the night game of the four got started.

Miura unlocked his alma mater's sports equipment storeroom in a well-practiced manner. Without anyone noticing he had taken a key out from somewhere, he looked like a student in a sports club hiding behind in school no matter how you looked at it...

The four of them took out bats, gloves and other equipment.

Then they freely and joyfully played ball games as each of them variously took on roles of pitching, batting and catching.

Halfway through, Godou took up his bat and calmly stepped into the batting zone with Miura on the pitcher's mound. Looking from here, Rui was standing behind Godou -- the position of the catcher.

"A casual match to decide the victor... How's that?"

As Miura proposed, Godou silently prepared to bat.

Things continued as naturally as water flowing downhill. Miura pitched as Godou batted. Thus the repetitive cycle began. Judgment calls of strike and ball were made by the catcher in the umpire's absence.

Godou started with ten strikes or so without hitting any balls, but thereafter, his hits began to grow in number.

As expected, a gifted pitcher who set his sights on higher goals and someone who had not touched baseball for half a year were on completely different levels. Nevertheless, Godou did not give up on the match and began to rouse his fighting spirit as a batter.

Presently, the moment finally arrived.

Miura was pitching his prided straight ball towards the top outside corner. This kind of speed and momentum was normally beyond a middle school catcher's ability to handle. Were it not for Rui's outstanding senses despite playing in an unfamiliar position, Miura would not have gone all out to throw this kind of pitch.

"Isn't this even faster than when I played catcher!?"

Godou yelled out as a savage grin appeared on his face the very instant he swung the bat.

--Everything seemed to stop, allowing him to see clearly. During his days as a player in peak condition, Godou had been

able to see through Miura's fastballs and hit them cleanly, but this was on a completely different level. The strong fastball pitch was clearly motionless in his view.

Then he swung, making contact squarely with the center of the bat.

With a clear and crisp bang, the ball was sent flying into the distance in a seemingly straight line.

"Struggling before your imminent demise, Godou! Just accept it and go out in three strikes!"

Miura pitched again but from this point onwards, the result was always the same.

Despite the outstanding speed and trajectories of his pitches, Godou saw through them all. He made hit after hit as if it was the most natural thing in the world. The only reason why he did not hit homeruns was because he realized on the third ball that "it would be bad if the ball flew outside the school."

"How amazing, Kusanagi-kun... You're in great shape, or perhaps not. Did you get possessed by a god or a devil?"

Rui widened his eyes nonchalantly, Nakayama applauded enthusiastically, while Miura clutched his head in shock, completely defeated...

"I guess when I focus myself on matters of winning and losing, this body's constitution naturally expresses itself..."

Muddling through a day of classes in a daze, Godou was on the road home from school.

Godou muttered quietly as he recalled events during spring break. His battles in Italy were the same. Inexplicably, his instincts and reflexes would suddenly become keen, allowing him to evade enemy attacks with the slimmest of margins. The crucial factor seems to be fighting spirit, so how seriously did he need to take a fight before adrenaline levels overflowed...?

Could it be possible, his current state was also -- Godou thought to himself, greatly unsettled.

Even a 100mph fastball from the American Major Leagues should be visible if he decided to face it seriously. Disregarding the issue of capturing the ball at the most appropriate spot, seeing through that speed and hitting it with the bat was probably not a problem?

"Now that I think about it, my body became keen on its own..."

In the match against Miura, his limbs started becoming agile at some point without consciously noticing. As if for the sake of winning, his rusty body was being fine tuned on a detailed level, with the goal of reaching the best possible condition.

"Using this body would be the same as cheating. At any rate, it's too underhanded for any serious competitive sports... It's quite unfair."

In direct proportion to fighting spirit, his concentration and condition rose to illogical heights.

Inconspicuous though it may be, it was quite an advantage. Godou originally intended on trying out other sports apart from baseball in high school, but he was now forced to give up. It would be too unfair for the other competitors.

That said, what could he do now?

"The cultural clubs don't really interest me, so how about working some jobs..."

In the process of his contemplations, a blonde foreign woman brushed past his shoulder -- It can't be.

Godou looked back in trepidation to find a tall Caucasian woman in her latter twenties. Completely different from the beautiful girl he had met in Italy.

How could it be her? The instant his heart settled down, someone came to strike a conversation.

"What's going on, Godou? You're showing an expression like you dropped your ice-cream."

It was his childhood friend who lived on the same shopping street, Tokunaga Asuka.

She was wearing her school uniform of Tokyo Metropolitan High. The two of them had been in the same school from kindergarten up through middle school, but were finally separated at high school. Her long hair was tied into twintails, one on each side of her head. Maintained since childhood, it was Asuka's trademark.

"What the heck kind of expression is that?"

"An expression of subtle disappointment. As if you weren't likely to eat another ice-cream again."

Since they were familiar friends who knew each other inside out , they started conversing without even bothering with greetings.

Observations pointed out by Asuka who had known him for so long, were generally quite accurate. But Godou frowned slightly and said:

"Nah, it isn't that kind of expression. Don't say such strange things."

"Really? Fine, if you say it isn't, I'm not going to argue over that. By the way, Godou, there's something I want to confirm. You must answer truthfully."

"What's with this sudden change of subject?"

"You... You're not hiding a girlfriend from me and Shizuka, right?"

The childhood friend's gaze was like a detective's interrogation of an important witness.

"As if that kind of thing was possible! What would make you speculate something so strange!?"

"Suspicion number one. You ran off to who knows where for spring break without returning home for ten days. Even when asked what happened during this period, you never gave a straight answer."

"...I am not obliged to report. Anyway, I don't see the connection."

"Suspicion number two. You've been looking blankly out at space and lacking in spirit after coming home. Furthermore, you sometimes stare intently at brunette and blonde women."

Godou was greatly shocked. He was completely unaware he was doing something like that.

But now that he looked back in context, she was quite right in certain ways. He could not deny that...

"Completely unfounded. Say, it's been so long since we last chatted, and all you talk about is stuff like this?"

"Shut up. In regards to you whose female relationships have grown in complexity somehow, I am simply worrying if you had some sort of strange encounter. Clearly you should be thanking me instead, not complaining about things."

Asuka shrugged as she spoke, completely self-absorbed.

"Whatever. I don't really think a girl can be found who can stomach a weird guy like you. Fine, investigations will resume once new evidence surfaces."

"I am nowhere as weird as you describe."

"Please restrict such foolish statements to the first of April. It is completely unconvincing, with zero credibility."

During times like these, Godou would pretend to be very calm and composed, when in actual fact he was quite taken aback.

Obviously he had not gained a girlfriend, but it was true that he made a friend in distant foreign lands under the influence of mysterious fate. As befitted the childhood friend dating back to kindergarten. Godou was truly impressed.

Part 2

Erica Blandelli was the most glamorous and beautiful young maiden Godou had ever met.

After the battle with Melqart, he woke up to find her attending to him by the pillow side.

"This time you slept for five and half hours. Your recovery time from near death has shortened slightly."

As soon as Godou woke up, Erica reported fluently.

"...Why did I almost die?"

"Because Melqart was not completely destroyed. He used his last strength to give you a blow, only then did he become powerless... Simply stated, it resulted in a double knockout."

Godou surveyed the room as he listened to her melodic voice's explanation.

It was the bedroom in the Zamparini mansion, and he was lying on the same bed as Erica. The rays of dusk streamed in through the window, illuminating the room orange.

"Well, whether [Heretic Gods] or Campiones, both sides possess almost immortal survivability. It is quite unheard of for a fight to be decided without one side dead."

"Almost immortal... Ah, now that you mention it..."

Godou agreed wholeheartedly, recalling his body clearly.

Despite facing those sorts of desperate crises where one would invariably think "I will probably die," no matter how many times, he had barely survived them all. I guess that's the kind of illogical beings we are.

"Since you'll resurrect anyway, there was no point in troubling a hospital, so I brought you here. And just as predicted, hospitalization was unnecessary."

Godou got up from bed to examine his body -- it was completely healthy without a single wound.

"In any case, you fought a divine king-class [Heretic God] immediately after rebirth as a god-slayer, and managed to get a draw. An outstanding performance award is a total bargain considering your labors."

This appeared to be Erica's distinct style of praise, but Godou shook his head in disagreement.

"No, I'm nowhere near that amazing. I think I owe the majority to Verethragna."

"What do you mean?"

"When Verethragna was lingering on Sardinia, that guy was seeking a worthy opponent for battle. Hence, the island's strongest god -- Melqart was revived."

I, seek nothing but defeat. Hence I arrive in search for a formidable foe.

Verethragna's arrogance but cheerful manner of speech was recalled from Godou's memory.

"Melqart manifested not because of me, but for the sake of fighting Verethragna. But since the original opponent disappeared, wouldn't it be natural for his fighting spirit and obsession with victory to be compromised? For someone inexperienced like me to find an opening, it feels like that's the cause. But it's just a feeling."

Unable to bear unworthy praise, Godou spoke out of such considerations.

However, Erica stared at Godou meaningfully and said:

"In just a few rounds of actual combat, for your instincts to have such a level of effect... That feeling of yours, has already surpassed the level of mortals."

"W-What do you mean by that?"

"Considering us mortal humans, whether a god of that level becomes stronger or weaker is completely irrelevant. Because, regardless of whether he is at peak condition or not, fighting equals death."

"..."

"Becoming king results in a body with this sort of disposition. Or rather, you require this kind of disposition to slay a god in the first place. This is equivalent to the 'chicken and egg' problem. There is no answer."

Erica nodded as if in admiration.

"Whatever. In any case, this incident is really over, so I can return to Japan without worries."

"Eh? You've already decided to return home, Godou!?"

"Of course. Didn't I mention that not too long ago?"

"Eh, yes. But it wasn't easy for you to become king and survive actual combat against gods. The option of staying behind in Europe, the center of magic, living as a Devil King is also--"

Uncharacteristically, Erica's speech displayed anxiety. It seemed like she was reluctant to part with Kusanagi Godou. To such a girl, Godou responded:

"No no. This kind of illogical power is better kept unused."

"...You're really unbelievable. Even if you're uninterested in a god-slaying authority, with no attachment to it at all, how should I put it? Your attitude towards power is quite easygoing."

"The power to fight or whatever, it's something that many people possess, right?"

Compared to a baseball team filled with fourth hitters, Godou preferred a team that deployed people in flexible strategies based on their strengths. He explained clearly:

"What's important is how a person chooses to use it. Based on this principle, I originally had no use for a power to battle gods. Since I have no use for it, I don't need it."

"That... I see, so that is why you received the ten incarnations..."

For some reason, Erica showed an expression of full agreement. Godou said to her:

"I never expected us to spend so much time together, but because of that, I must say goodbye now. You've taken so much care of me, Erica, if a chance arises in the future, I will definitely return the favor."

"Yes, I look forward to it. But Godou, if you're going back to Japan, why do you still plan on encountering me again?"

Finding something greatly amusing, Erica smiled.

"Isn't the eastern country of the rising sun quite far from the European continent?"

"Even if you say it's far, it's only half a day's flight, so it's not that far after all. If a friend is ever in need, and I can help in some way, I believe it is worth the time and expense to travel here."

"Right! This is precisely your manner of thinking!"

Godou was struck by a most precious sight at this time, Erica's innocent smile.

It was not a pretentious smile, nor an eerie devilish smile, nor a lioness' ferocious smile. This was an innocent, bright, cute smile that belonged to someone her age.

Godou instantly felt his heart beating intensely. To describe it as a sudden shock would not be wrong.

"Ah yes, by the way, even though it's only about Zamparini, that guy was found earlier. After Melqart blew him away, he was drifting in the sea."

"Really!? To think he actually survived!"

Godou yelled out loudly to disguise his quickened heartbeat.

In truth, it was not entirely acting. After all, the old man's survival was good news indeed.

"Making the most of all magic at his disposal, he drifted for an entire day on the stormy seas. When the storm subsided today, his dove familiar finally managed to fly back to the mansion and report his survival. A ship is currently going out to pick him up, and he'll probably be admitted to a hospital tonight."

"That's really good news. Are we going to visit him later?"

That night, Godou and Erica slept in the same room just like yesterday. As per their custom, they demarcated an invisible boundary and slept in the same bed.

The unfortunate Old Man Zamparini was sent from the harbor to the hospital, so he was not home tonight.

Hence, all said and done, it would have been fine to sleep in other rooms. However, Erica did not elect to do that, and for some unknown reason, neither did Godou object.

Probably because of the stress immediately after the deadly battle, neither of them were able to sleep as they lay on the bed. They chatted sporadically, softly conversing with each other.

When night yielded to dawn, Kusanagi Godou welcomed the day of his return home.

Getting a ride from [Panormus], they arrived at a comprehensive hospital in Palermo city and met the rescued Walter Zamparini.

"Oh my, that was so careless of me. If another opportunity arises, please remember to call upon me. I will surely prove my worth next time!"

Reportedly, he was still quite haggard last night.

Residing in a hospital room far more luxurious than for other patients, the old man seemed completely unaware of smoking restrictions as he lit and puffed on a cigar, requesting for a chance to avenge his honor. Without any external injuries to recover from, he was looking a lot better.

His reason for hospitalization was supposedly pure exhaustion. Nevertheless, that concern also seemed quite redundant.

The sight of the vigorous old man made Godou smile wryly.

Afterwards, he went to the airport with Erica.

Somehow, they ran into Lucretia Zola who had just flown in from Sardinia.

"Who knew I would once again encounter you, whom has returned safely from the Mediterranean, ordained by fate to survive... Oh well, it seems like all sorts of unexpected things happened."

Unexpectedly pedestrian yet possessing sublime beauty, Lucretia exclaimed in surprise.

Recalling all sorts of "finished" matters, Godou stood stiffly in the airport lobby with an "Eh."

"That's right. This person has the ability to respond to changing circumstances with astounding swiftness. He can already be considered a full-fledged Devil King."

This comment instantly caused Erica to straighten her face and Lucretia to murmur "oh" softly.

Their gazes focused on a young man. A handsome blond with a tall and tightly sculpted physique.

He was dressed in a bright red shirt and white cotton pants. There was a Latin air of easygoing thoughtlessness about him. With a smile like the summer Mediterranean sun (or put differently, a foolish aura), he was walking over.

"It must be you. You're the seventh. Not bad, you're even younger than me back then!"

He suddenly spoke to Godou in a sweet voice that matched the handsome man's face quite well.

However, perhaps due to his shortcoming of frivolous airs, he did not seem like a lady-killer.

"It's been a while, Sir Salvatore... And your reason for coming to Sicily is?"

Somehow the name Erica used to address this young man sounded familiar.

"Ah, it's been a while, you must be Ellen Ivanovic, right? Oh my , actually I was still in Argentina until a few days ago."

Boldly getting names wrong, the young man continued unconcerned.

"I was suddenly informed that a [Heretic God] had appeared so I hastily made my way back to Europe. But then all transportation to Sardinia was stopped due to the heavy storm."

The young man called Salvatore seemed to be in his early twenties.

Godou noticed he had a cylinder slung over his shoulder. Its shape and size was large enough to carry a baseball bat, and it caused bone-chilling fear for seemingly no reason at all. Surely, something most dangerous was contained inside.

Zamparini's submachine gun could not compare in any way...

"I went to Sardinia as soon as the storm calmed down. I asked the local associations many questions, about the gods that had appeared and the god who was reassembled and reportedly defeated by the seventh. It seemed a shame to return just like that, so I came over here to meet my new kin."

The seventh. Kin. Those words could only mean one thing.

The instant Godou realized, Lucretia Zola greeted the young man reverently.

"Indeed. Then allow me to make introductions. This young man , Kusanagi Godou, is indeed the seventh to become king after you, the sixth. The god-slayer who slew warlord Verethragna and repelled the Phoenician divine king Melqart at Sicily."

"I see. I am Salvatore Doni. Let's get along well from now on!"

Paying half-hearted attention to Lucretia's introductions, Doni offered his greeting. Just as Godou hesitated over how to respond, Doni suddenly said something unexpected.

"So, I've got a minor suggestion, why don't you have a duel with me?"

"What?"

"Other than gods or our kin, there are no opponents we kings can fight seriously. I'm sure you'll soon find this fact troubling. So, how about a duel to commemorate our first meeting?"

Godou replied reflexively to this stupid proposal.

"I'm sorry, I don't really understand your joke. There's no time left, so please save your words for next time."

In the near future, Godou would come to regret concluding this encounter so hastily.

At the time, why did he waste respectful speech on that idiot... Educated in a sports environment since childhood, speaking to elders with politeness had become an ingrained habit. Nevertheless, this should really be adjusted based on the person...

Regardless, an unexpected meeting had occurred. It was time for the flight.

Sent off by Erica and Lucretia, as well as the young man named Doni, Godou started his return journey to Japan.

In actual fact, he had spent a total of ten days in Italy.

A period multiple times that of his initial plans.

Part 3

Godou had experienced a turbulent ten days in Italy.

After returning home, Godou spent the remainder of his spring break purposelessly. After that, April arrived with his new life as a high school student. With that, things had basically ended in a daze.

That said, it was not as if he had done nothing.

Back when exams had ended and he was concerned that his body was getting out of shape, Godou had started jogging almost

every day and doing stretching and other muscle training that did not require equipment. Thanks to that, he managed to maintain an energetic mental state after returning from Italy.

Two weeks had passed since the new school term, and he found himself with too much free time.

Even passing time doing nothing would result in hunger, resulting in getting fat. Bored out of his mind, the idea of "I should start working jobs" suddenly occurred to him.

The simple explanation: Kusanagi Godou was a man.

"Since the root of human nature is animalistic and coarse, I can't continue this nervous mental state."

Hence, on a Thursday in late April.

After school, Godou made his way to a shop located in the Adachi special ward in Tokyo. Through an acquaintance of his grandfather, he had found a part time job entitled "assistant in an antique shop which collects broken junk that has been sleeping in old storerooms."

By the time he got off from work at 10:30pm, it was quite late at night.

On the way home, Godou found himself in trouble. Walking along the streets at night, he was surrounded by seven foreigners.

This occurred on a bridge crossing over a river in a residential zone.

Looking down from the steel-built bridge, one could see a river bank covered with flourishing weeds as well as a top class river which required no flattering descriptions of magnificence. Once Godou stepped foot on this bridge, he found four men in front and three more appeared behind him.

Blocked from advancing or retreating, Godou looked to find traffic and pedestrians absent.

"So... Can I help you? This seems to be our first meeting, right?"

Even though the mood was far from friendly, Godou asked gently.

The seven men were all tall and strongly built.

Funnily enough, they were all masked. The type which covered the eyes and the nose, reminiscent of masquerade balls except with more varied clothing.

Men in ordinary suits. Rough men in t-shirts and construction pants. Men in jackets.

Based on their complexion, one was black while the others were white.

The black guy was the most conspicuous and seemed quite dangerous. Standing at roughly 190cm, his weight was likely over 100kg. It was certainly believable to call him a heavyweight fighter .

Wearing a tank top, his bare shoulders were tattooed with poisonous spiders...

"Excuse me, I'm a bit unclear as to why I'm being treated this way."

This sinister group, were they the comrades of Italian magi?

Godou felt very uncomfortable from their tactic of surrounding a lone person, but he continued to speak politely.

When people look like they are itching for a fight, nothing good would come out of responding in kind. Godou tried to get out of the situation through gentle and peaceful measures, but the men began to take action without speaking a word.

"..."

The black man approached from the front and suddenly launched a right punch. This was clearly no amateur punch, proving Godou's earlier suspicions to be correct.

Fast and heavy, it was a punch flying towards his face in the shortest possible trajectory.

Godou managed to evade, most likely thanks to that constitution of his body. The instant the man clenched his fist, a " switch" seemed to turn on inside Godou. Immediately, his concentration became keen, allowing him to easily see the incoming punch--

Anyway, Godou evaded to the left first.

But the black man was clearly no amateur. Without withdrawing his extended fist, he grabbed at Godou's shoulder instead. Still recovering from his dodging posture, Godou was unable to evade this time.

He was caught.

Violently pulling Godou towards him, the black man delivered a strong knee attack!

"Gah~!"

Struck in the stomach by that horrifying impact, Godou groaned.

Unable to bear the pain, he bent over and fell on his knees. Furthermore, the other men took this as a signal to attack. The tragic group beating thus began.

The enemies were seven strong men well-trained in martial arts. Battered by their merciless punches and kicks, Godou felt intense pain and was thrown against the asphalt of the road.

Even so, he continued to resist.

Godou attempted to use the [Bull], the incarnation for facing enemies far stronger than him, but it was no good. These guys -- big strong guys on a human level were nowhere enough.

Conditions were not fulfilled unless fighting a bearer of greater "strength." Godou continued to experience tangible pain.

Several minutes passed in this manner.

Due to the lateness at night, neither cars nor pedestrians passed by. It almost seemed as if people had been driven away by magic. Then Godou yelled out slowly.

"T-Treating someone like a punching bag... You guys, you have no sense of right or wrong!"

Hearing his angered voice, the team of seven men panted as they lowered their heads.

"Damn it, this monster..."

"I-Is this really an opponent beyond our so-called level..."

"Comrades, do not despair! If we fail this mission, there is no returning home for us!"

Speaking one after another, they made it sound like they were the victims instead.

Nevertheless, they were indeed out of options. It was true that Godou had injuries all over, but he also remained unexpectedly lively. On the other hand, the attackers' hands and legs were hurting.

A man who had landed a left hook on Godou's face ended up with his wrist twisted into a strange angle. His fist also seemed to have fractured. A man who had taken a low kick at Godou's shin also appeared to be in similar pain, nodding his head as he held his leg.

...A Campione's bones are harder than iron, Erica had mentioned once.

If that was the case, haphazardly beating in an unarmed fashion on various bones -- the cranium, the cheek bones, the lower jaw, ribs, the thighs, the shins, etc, resulted in this.

However, Godou's bruises, scratches and internal hemorrhage were innumerable.

Only his bones did not break or shatter, muscles and tendons were fine, brain and internal organs needed no mentioning. And most important of all, the [Camel], which Godou could only use when suffering from severe injuries, was still unavailable.

Simply stated, that was the level of injury he sustained.

"Looks like we must prepare ourselves for a struggle to the death... Everyone, take out your weapons!"

The man who appeared to be the leader of the seven-man team suddenly produced a double-bladed axe!

The other men also revealed dangerous tools in their hands -- slender swords, handguns, short swords with gauntlets, and even hammers.

Erica had also used that magic to conjure weapons before. These guys were magi after all!

Godou shivered in fear. Barehanded attacks aside, bladed weapons and firearms would not simply end with "Ouch!" -- No, he was certain he had had enough, he did not want to experience this any further.

In order to penetrate this encirclement, what should he do!? The instant he thought that, Godou sprang into action.

"The one unblunted and unapproachable! Oath-breaking sinners be purged by the iron hammer of justice!"

This should be usable -- the incarnation that came to mind, was instantly summoned.

Affected by the spell words, the river water below showed a murky black color. This black color scattered blue-black sparks as it took form.

Verethragna's fifth incarnation, the [Boar].

The 20m black divine beast which could only be summoned by a wish to destroy a massive target. In any case, it was summoned for the purpose of sending this bridge flying.

"Uwaaaaaaaaaah!?"

Seeing the divine beast manifesting before their eyes, the seven-man team cried out simultaneously.

The [Boar] proceeded to roar as usual.

ROOOOOAAAAAAR!

Roaring, the [Boar] jumped vertically.

Under the impact of the casual headbutt -- like smashing paper craft, the steel bridge was demolished. With excess momentum, the beast's majestic form continued flying several dozen meters up, displayed against the night sky of Tokyo's Adachi special ward.

Furthermore, the [Boar]'s howls caused destruction like supersonic waves.

The booming roars shattered all the glass in the neighboring residential streets with resounding crashes.

The seven-man team were sent flying as if struck by a sonic wave and swept beneath the collapsing bridge -- the river shore. A few unlucky ones fell directly into the polluted waters.

As a side note, Godou the summoner had already hurried down to the river shore for shelter.

When the [Boar] began to leap, he had quickly jumped down from the bridge.

"We are so sorry!"

"Really sorry!"

"In regards to this foolish act, please spare our insignificant lives !"

"For the sake of my family and kin, please forgive me!"

The battle(?) on the bridge had ended.

As firefighters, police and nearby residents converged at the site of the incident, Godou and the seven men escaped to a certain park. Then the seven men suddenly prostrated themselves on the ground in "dogeza."[17]

Apparently they were aware of "dogeza" as the highest form of apology.

By the way, these guys were all speaking in Italian. After they removed those idiotic masks, Godou was surprised by their

unexpectedly youthful faces. They seemed to be a bunch ranging in age from late teens to early twenties. Rather than a team of magi , they resembled a gang of delinquents more...

"In the end, I retaliated(?), so let's just leave it as a draw. But you guys, why did you have to dress up like that?"

Godou questioned them as they huddled their massive physiques in "dogeza."

"Even if you kidnapped me for a ransom, my family doesn't have money -- actually that's not right. Rather, I think my mom will flatly refuse. After all, she is the type of mother who would tell me 'I don't want to spend money, so you'd better find a way out yourself' even if I were a hostage..."

"Ah, no. This isn't our purpose."

"Yes, in fact we're from Milan. Some rumors are currently circulating about Kusanagi-sama over there."

"Rumors? What do you mean?"

Informed in polite Italian, Godou frowned.

"These are still unsubstantiated... But anyway, recently a Japanese male resembling a [King] was spotted around southern Italy, fighting a god. Then our alliance leader, Sir Salvatore, said ' Someone caused a ruckus on my turf' and expressed great anger."

"Sir Salvatore... Ah, that guy. But why is he angry?"

Recalling the frivolous smiling face of the young man he met at the airport, Godou did not think he was angry.

"Because Sir Salvatore is a warrior amongst warriors. He is a great man who never gives up on a fight whenever a [Heretic God] appears. Hence, he should be angry because his rightful foe was stolen by Kusanagi-sama."

"A warrior amongst warriors!?"

Compared to his impression of the character named Salvatore Doni, there was no description further from the truth.

Godou reflexively answered "You must be kidding!" However, that cylindrical case -- Godou recalled the dangerous impression he had felt.

Did his instincts as a Campione discern the man's true nature, thus giving warning...?

"So, you people are under that man's orders to attack me?"

"Yeah... That's right."

Receiving such a subtle answer, Godou glared each man in the face in turn, putting on a straight face and said "And then?" This immediately obtained results.

"S-Sir Salvatore commanded the [Copper Black Cross] which had helped Kusanagi-sama locally -- in other words, our superiors. His orders were to bring Japan's king, Kusanagi Godou, back to him by any means necessary."

Rather than being scared of Godou, it seemed like it was the result of the notoriety of the Devil Kings.

Godou was surprised by the frantic confession of the leader of the seven men.

"Eh? So you guys are comrades of Erica!?"

"Not comrades but subordinates from a lower branch of the organization. A group responsible for chores and dirty jobs ordered from above."

"Feels kind of like a yakuza hierarchy..."

Imagining various yakuza gangs, Godou nodded.

"As expected, the brutal act of subduing a Devil King Campione by 'force' is judged as too risky for proper members by our superiors -- the [Copper Black Cross] themselves... Hence, we were sent instead."

"But why do you have to use force? Couldn't you have negotiated by talking or in writing?"

For Godou, this was intended as a serious suggestion.

But the seven men instantly showed gloomy expressions.

"How should I put it, we will be done in by the Devil King."

"A man who can even slay a god. The kind of anger they exhibit when roused would be impossible for us to imagine. Same for the current Kusanagi-sama--"

"Eh, me? I think I'm quite a mild, or even unexpectedly gentle person, right..."

"What are you talking about? In order to defeat us, you were cruel enough to unleash a divine beast -- as expected of a young king. A savage warrior standing on equal ground with Sir Salvatore, we are all utterly impressed."

"...Also, about Erica."

Godou had not felt these kinds of fearful and terrified stares since Sicily.

Uncomfortable with that feeling, Godou changed the subject.

"If she was involved, she should have proposed a milder plan of approach, so what is she doing now? Especially when I am just a phone call away."

Before they parted, they had exchanged contact information.

Even though Godou had not contacted her because he was embarrassed to call or message a girl, he did not expect Erica to be equally indecisive.

"Our lady -- Dame Blandelli was prosecuted for assisting Kusanagi-sama, and is currently under house arrest until Sir Salvatore's rage subsides."

"House arrest?"

Godou pondered as he listened to the explanations of the young men prostrated on the ground before him.

This situation was not good--

Chapter 5 - Milan Rhapsody

Part 1

On a certain night in April, Godou found out from the team of seven attackers about the conflict in Italy.

Also, having failed their assault mission, the attackers apparently intended to flee to southeast Asia or South America, presumably to lie low until things cooled over.

"...I feel almost like a criminal."

"Well, just similar circumstances."

Hurting all over his body, Godou's injuries healed as he spoke.

Whether bruises or internal bleeding, all recovered without a trace. The pain vanished. On the other hand, the seven men who were caught up in the [Boar]'s destruction were the ones who were left with injuries all over instead.

After bidding the men goodbye, Godou took out a memo.

It was a memo that recorded how to make an international telephone call. Godou looked at the section on calls from Japan to Italy as he operated his cellphone. Even though the calling charges were expensive, Godou had no choice. No matter what, Erica must be contacted -- thinking that, he held the phone to his ear and waited.

The loud ringing tone echoed in his ear. No one was picking up. Just as Godou was about to give up:

'Calling at such a time means that you have become aware of the situation.'

Naturally, the voice Godou heard was Erica's.

'Let me clarify beforehand. Godou, your being a pacifist is one of your good points even though it's a lie.'

"What is going on?"

'For the organization's lower branch personnel to be deployed, and to fail the mission regardless of their numbers, such clear mismanagement reflecting poorly on the organization's reputation should normally be impossible. Nevertheless, given that you're calling now, it is only natural to assume you threatened them with a show of absolute force.'

"...Putting that aside for now, let's cut to the chase. I heard those guys mention a very strange order."

Unbelievable how much Erica could deduce from a single call.

Erica's wit and intelligence were impeccable. Godou changed the subject a little forcibly.

'It's Salvatore Doni-sama. The sixth Campione. Born in Italy. He is the alliance leader ruling over the magical associations of southern Europe.'

"Alliance leader... Something like a big boss?"

'The description lacks elegance, but you are correct. However, Sir Salvatore rules but does not administrate. Rather than ruling through troublesome methods of domination, he keeps southern European magi in line through fear and servitude.'

"The one I met at the airport in Palermo? Why are you telling me this?"

Godou brought up the greatest question occupying his mind, and Erica replied gloomily:

'That time, he asked you "Let's have a duel?" It was not a joke. He was completely serious. But Godou refused, so that's the cause.'

Godou was rendered speechless by this unexpected answer and could only say "Eh?"

'Probably because he is interested in the Campione named Kusanagi Godou and wanted to have a serious fight. But you coldly rejected him...'

"Wait a minute, Erica. These things you're saying are a bit strange."

'There's nothing strange about me. Strange are the things that go through Sir Salvatore's mind.'

"You really said an awful thing without any hesitation..."

Godou recalled the conflict with Bianchi.

At the time, Erica had subtly agreed that a certain Salvatore was an idiot.

"In other words, that guy is a fool with no common sense?"

'Stated simply without the use of rhetoric, yes, that's exactly it. Anyone with the slightest courage and sense of justice who has spent any amount of time with him, would express their impressions with the words "fool" or "idiot" without hesitation.'

"Why would that kind of guy be treated as the boss!?"

'It cannot be helped. Because he is a Campione. Undoubtedly, he is the god-slaying warrior! Furthermore, stupidity and magnanimity are not mutually exclusive.'

Erica's serious tone of voice made Godou silent.

'Indeed, he is a fool foreign to common logic. Nevertheless, he is also a rare hero. Even if all the magi of the world challenged him with all their might, there is no chance of winning against him. The one known as Salvatore Doni, is precisely a monster of that level.'

After delivering this exceptional commentary, Erica continued further.

'Hey Godou, if you intend to dig deeper into this incident -- or rather, get involved with us, it's best for you to give up the notion. You should continue living peacefully in Tokyo.'

Godou frowned to find his hidden wish suddenly exposed.

'Visits like this one will happen who knows how many times so you should dodge them appropriately. Given your power, even if you encounter trouble, there shouldn't be any difficulties, right?'

"Hey hey..."

Realizing the intentions of Erica's faction, Godou was slightly surprised.

'Listen well, this is a critical juncture in your life. Everything that happened in Italy is just a dream. Please wipe it clean from your memory and continue living a peaceful life.'

"That time with Melqart, didn't you say I must make a stand and fight?!"

'There was no choice then. But this time, we still managed to escape from Sir Salvatore. So here's my greatest advice: do not step foot in Italy -- or rather, Europe, ever again.'

Erica's seriousness could be felt from her solemn diction.

'Sir Salvatore simply cannot wait to start a fight should you come. Furthermore, we of the [Copper Black Cross] have also received strict orders to restrain you with all our power. You understand what that means, right?'

"...Erica will become my enemy too?"

'There's no other choice. Even if you are also a Campione and stand on equal terms with Sir Salvatore... We are an Italian

association. We have no choice but to prioritize the orders, and especially strict orders, from our alliance leader.'

Erica spoke indifferently with an emotionless voice.

'Hence, I guess our relationship ends here. In fact, my telling you all this would also be considered inappropriate... But no matter, it would be too heartless to go without saying goodbye.'

"Ends here? Wait a minute, Erica!"

'Farewell, Kusanagi Godou. Even though our days together were short, those memories will be vividly carved into the depths of my mind forever.'

The connection was cut. Even if he called again, she probably would not pick up again. Godou sighed.

What should I do? Live like a hermit, as Erica suggested? It was indeed a wise choice. Safe, peaceful and practical. But--

"What the heck. In this kind of situation, how can I leave you alone!?"

What Godou wished most of all, was to ask Erica what exactly he should do.

A great plan had formed in his mind. But he needed detailed opinions from others to make adjustments.

The reason he decided that, was because the only friend he had made in Italy, was Erica alone--

By the time his plan was placed into motion, it was already the last week of April.

Japan's Golden Week had just begun. As a high school student, Kusanagi Godou also obtained his long sought extended holiday. As for him, he planned on using the entire time on the faraway land thousands of miles west of Tokyo. Having waited so long for this time to arrive, he had to spend another twelve hours on a flight.

The time difference was eight hours. By the time Godou arrived at Milan's Malpensa Airport, it was afternoon.

Forcing his body in spite of the dizziness and fatigue caused by jet lag, Godou boarded the train. Even though this city only had three rail lines, overwhelmingly fewer than Tokyo, the routes combined together in a fairly complicated manner.

However, Godou no longer suffered from any language barrier.

Asking for directions from passersby or staff as he took the train , Godou spent a little over an hour to reach his destination, the Milano Centrale railway station. Godou only used it for the subway, but this was also a hub where domestic routes and international trains converged. There seemed to be a total of twenty-four platforms.

"As befits a place even more urbanized than Sardinia or Sicily..."

Godou exclaimed in his heart.

Having lived in Tokyo, Godou was not surprised by large metropolitan cities. However, this was a place where modern cityscape coexisted seamlessly with Gothic or Roman streets like Europe's ancient capitals.

Also, this district offered nostalgic trams above ground.

Along the gray street, an orange-colored tram slowly arrived.

Godou searched for his target building amidst scenery that could not be found in Japan. He also had the option of taking a taxi , but since many unknowns lay ahead of this journey, being economical was important.

...As a side note, Godou also intended this journey to be self-financed.

After Godou contacted Old Man Zamparini's for counsel, the old man had prepared the plane ticket (first class too!). Receiving this present in a panic, Godou had frantically tried to refuse on the phone.

'Don't worry about it. It should already be obvious, money is no object!'

Thus, Godou's refusal was boldly denied, yakuza style. Accepting the ticket with immense gratitude, Godou desperately begged and managed to downgrade the seat to economy class...

The old man also informed him how far information on " Kusanagi Godou" had spread in Italy.

'The magi of Sicily and Sardinia only publicized your deeds in accordance to Your Highness' orders. Hence, on the Italian mainland, rumors about Kusanagi Godou are only circulating in an unsubstantiated fashion. The only exception being Erica Blandelli's [Copper Black Cross].'

The old man proceeded to refuse Godou's offers of compensation by asserting "If anything happens, I too, wish to extend a helping hand..."

Furthermore, the one who told Godou about the building he was currently searching for, was the other person he sought counsel from.

Video conferencing with Lucretia Zola whose home was always equipped with a computer and network access, Godou went through a "strategy meeting" with her.

'If you wish to make contact with Miss Erica's association, the [Copper Black Cross], visiting the building of their headquarters is the most direct way.'

"Does a secret association even have headquarters?"

'Do know that it is an association with a long history and connections to the lineages of the Knights Templar. The Order was not only a military group but also the world's first organization in the financial industry, the precursor of banking. In order to rob them of their immense wealth, King Philip IV of France even went so far as to disband the Order.'

"I see..."

'As one of its descendants, the [Copper Black Cross] also plays the role of a financial group to the outside world. In actual fact, it is a prosperous corporation that manages several different businesses. Furthermore, its representative, Mr Paolo Blandelli -- namely, the uncle in custody of Miss Erica, is the commander-in-chief of the [Copper Black Cross] as well as a legendary knight.'

Thus Godou was informed by the beauty who possessed slothful airs and a sensual body.

Keeping Lucretia's words firmly in mind, Godou looked at the map as he wandered through the business district around the central station. Finally, he found the building he was looking for.

A grand fifteen-story building. The people who frequented the premises were mostly men and women in suits.

A high school student, and especially a Japanese who was clearly of a different ethnicity, would need to be quite bold to enter that building. Nevertheless, Godou stepped inside without hesitation.

Walking through the impeccably clean entrance of the building, he found the reception before him.

Godou smiled and spoke to the middle-aged woman sitting there:

"Can you relay this to Paolo Blandelli with utmost urgency: Kusanagi Godou has arrived in Milan. I will enjoy myself a little in this neighborhood, so do whatever your obligations dictate. If you want to take me to Salvatore Doni, bring it on as if your life depended on it. Please inform him with this kind of feeling."

On Lucretia's advice, Godou made up this instigating speech.

Having expressed his demands, Godou departed without waiting for the woman to reply. Along the way, he even gave the security camera an intense glare before leaving the building.

After that, he took a casual stroll.

Since he was here already, he might as well get a view of the scenery. Godou thought as he walked.

Part 2

Godou got off the subway at Duomo station, four stops away from Milano Centrale.

Duomo -- a Catholic cathedral, in other words.

This was a sacred domain for people to pray for wishes and sing praises of the Lord. In short, it was an elegant and majestic religious building. In terms of interior decoration, this Duomo di Milano truly stood out from other cathedrals.

"Well, ignoring basics and jumping directly into practical applications, it doesn't mean much anyway."

With that, Godou began touring Milan's standard sightseeing destination, the great cathedral.

This was the world's largest Gothic building, with almost 150(!) spires, the tallest one over a hundred meters in height. There were also over 200 painted sculptures. Given its long construction period of five centuries, the cathedral's magnificence matched perfectly.

Godou had previously seen cathedrals on the islands of Sardinia and Sicily.

But in comparison, this was definitely in a class of its own.

After sightseeing for a while, Godou realized he had yet to have lunch. He was strolling along the main street and wondering what to eat when the aroma of cheese wafted into his nostrils.

Following the scent, he found a delicatessen-like shop with a crowd of people standing out front eating something like bread. Lining up obediently, it took quite a while before Godou could enter the shop. Everyone was there to buy the popular pizza, which explained the large crowd standing around eating.

The semicircular chewy bread was filled with plenty of cheese and tomato sauce.

Indulging himself in this unusual atmosphere, Godou finished his hot and tasty junk food.

There was a kind of itchy and slightly unpleasant feeling on his neck.

Someone was probably watching him. Were they going to start an assault out on the open streets? Godou surveyed his surroundings. The place was packed and bustling.

Godou's authority did not offer abilities that would not disturb the surroundings.

Perhaps, a more open space -- a place easier to act unrestrained in would be better. Godou resumed walking once again. Luckily he already had a destination in mind. As it happened, the next place would be rather ideal for his purposes.

Castello Sforzesco.

It was the castle of the Sforza family ruling Milan in the fifteenth century. During the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci had participated in its interior design. The very spacious plaza in front of this castle was adjacent to Milan's top park -- Parco Sempione.

Passing by the castle, Godou intended to enter the park

Standing before the castle, he waited for the traffic lights to change. Like other major cities, Milan's traffic volume was massive as evidenced by the vehicles whizzing before Godou's eyes. At this time, a large RV suddenly accelerated and hurtled directly towards Godou!

"Huh?"

Godou stared in shock at the speeding heavy vehicle.

Then he realized. People in the European world of magic all seemed to think of Campiones as equivalent to monsters. Furthermore, Campiones were virtually immune to the magic they specialized in.

Using "force" on such an opponent, was naturally equivalent to the efforts of ants.

Anyway, I should protect myself first.

Evade -- no, attack. Godou instantly made his decision. At some point earlier, the [Bull] had been unlocked. Though heavyweight fighters were ineligible, man-eating tigers or RVs were perfectly fine as targets -- this usage condition was really way too strict.

In any case, Godou's body instantly overflowed with monstrous strength. He then thrust his arms forward.

Thrusting his hands into the RV's hood, he completely halted the vehicle, and using all his strength--

"Yaaaaaaaaaah!"

With both hands, Godou raised the two-ton RV high above his head.

Raised in the air, the four tires turned noisily, fruitlessly expending power. In the driver's seat was a middle-aged man, his face convulsing from fear.

Godou set the RV upside down on the sidewalk.

Since the car's roof was resting on the ground, the four wheels continued spinning in the air. Upside down, the driver in the vehicle made a sign of the cross as he mentally prepared himself for something.

People nearby were basically flabbergasted. They must be having a hard time accepting this scene as reality due to its ridiculous nature. Whether young or old, black or white or oriental , everyone at the immediate scene was stunned. Except a nearby man muttering "Wow..."

However, there also existed people who did not seem particularly surprised. At the intersection of the plaza before Castello Sforzesco, on the roadside and various other places, there were indeed several men who glared sharply at Godou's brute strength.

In that case -- with a clang, Godou opened the RV's door on the driver's side.

"Excuse me. Do you belong to that Copper whatever association ?"

He directed his question to the driver who was still sitting upside down. Since he was speaking to an elder, Godou naturally used polite language.

"Anyway, I am going to the castle and will be waiting for you guys there. Please tell your companions that."

Since their numbers were many, it might be difficult to handle if he entered the park as originally planned. In terms of overpowering large groups, a wide open space would take less effort.

"Also, can I rely on you guys to help guide ordinary people in the city to safety?"

Palermo's Zamparini and his faction had been able to do it.

Erica's fellow members should be capable of the same given their immense financial clout. Well, it did occur to Godou that things were probably different in Milan this time, especially since they were suddenly asked without sufficient time for preparation, but he ignored these notions.

Listening to this request, the middle-aged RV driver nodded repeatedly.

Rather than a "brave warrior challenging the Devil King Campione," he resembled more of a "worldly man rashly sent to battle on orders." Quite pitiful, to say the least.

In any case, Godou left the RV and ran into Castello Sforzesco a couple of dozen meters away.

Erica was sitting in a room, watching events unfold using magic from afar.

This was a popular scene in fairy tales, analogous to a crystal ball showing distant happenings to a witch...

Currently, the images were shown to Erica in exactly the same way.

Except that object displaying them was a large slim LCD television.

Erica's taste for the nostalgic preferred the old fashioned crystal ball. However, her fellow Great Knights did not approve and hoped she would turn to more convenient tools.

--The current location was the tenth floor of the [Copper Black Cross]'s headquarters, a "lounge" reserved for the top echelons.

Only those who had attained the rank of Great Knight were permitted to use this room. Furnished with a billiard table, darts, chess and other entertainment equipment, there was even a private bar.

'Yaaaaaaaaaah!'

From the screen, Erica could see a familiar youth in an active display of vigor.

He lifted a large vehicle, opened its door, declared "fight at Castello Sforzesco" and left. Very likely, he did not want to cause trouble for the surrounding people.

In that case, there was clearly an option which did not require fighting--

Erica was secretly surprised that the youth overlooked this fact.

"Just as we were at our wits' ends dealing with Sir Salvatore's unreasonable excesses, yet another Campione arrives? Reality is a complete nightmare..."

The one lamenting was one of the Great Knights, Clarens.

Bearing a shaved head and a presentable face, he was a striking black man from Holland.

Thirty-one years of age. Equipped with capability, experience and insightful knowledge, he was in fact a leading knight of the [Copper Black Cross]. But because his nationality was not Italian, he could not inherit the leadership title of the [Diavolo Rosso].

"It can't be helped. The opponent is a god-slayer, a Devil King Campione after all."

The one complaining in an outraged tone of voice was Gennaro Gantz.

Despite being an unrefined man in his early twenties, he was a Great Knight with substantial achievements in magic and swordsmanship. Hailing from southern Italy, he was Erica's competitor for the [Diavolo Rosso] title.

In spite of his young age, the beard covering his face allowed him to convincingly pass for over thirty years of age.

"Without the kind of personality that insists on paying injuries back fivefold, he probably would not have been able to oppose a god..."

"By Sir Salvatore's decree, 'You people must lead Kusanagi Godou to my location by any means necessary.'"

Clarens groaned with a gloomy expression.

"For us to naively execute this command and battle the seventh Campione would be truly absurd. While we pretend to undertake this mission, the estimate for finding that man is also..."

"Currently, Sir Salvatore is refusing to leave Milan. Critically overseeing things at this juncture, you're not going to get away with phoning it in. Because you are in the [King]'s presence... By the way, Clarens."

In a manner unbefitting of a Great Knight, Gantz spoke up.

Even though Erica did not hold this aspect of Gantz's in high regard, he felt the same way about her. Gantz too, often grumbled about Erica's facade of deliberate elegance.

"How are things on the search front?"

"Sir Salvatore's chaperone... Or rather, his butler Andrea Rivera is still missing."

Blurting out chaperone, Clarens corrected himself nonchalantly.

"His last sighting happens to be two weeks ago. Our [Copper Black Cross] received the decree exactly one day before that."

"Then isn't the truth obvious!"

Gantz roared gruffly.

"If that serious man disappeared, Sir Salvatore surely must have thought he could spread his wings!"

"Ah yes. The report about Rivera said, contact was lost on his way to the Etruscan ruins at Bologna on Sir Salvatore's orders... Very likely, the incident started there. Maybe a group kidnapped and imprisoned Rivera on Sir Salvatore's instigation or something like that--"

Hearing the two of them sigh, Erica slowly opened her mouth.

"If that's the case, then their interests are aligned with Sir Salvatore. Perhaps in a few days, Sir Andrea will be found safe and sound."

This was her first time to speak at the table. Presumably she had kept silent because she was under "house arrest." Hearing that, Clarens frowned.

"Given the current situation, isn't the battle between Devil Kings imminent?"

"Even though Sir Salvatore does not ponder sufficiently, he is surprisingly meticulous sometimes. Currently, he is dallying in Milan for the sake of some momentous change."

Salvatore Doni's base, was the region of Tuscany in central Italy.

He did not keep a personal army, with only a handful of attendants and a lone sword by his side, spending his easygoing days in leisure. Whenever he needed subordinates to command, all he needed was simply make a request to an association.

In this instance, that role was played by the [Copper Black Cross].

Citing "your Blandelli family's daughter served as Kusanagi Godou's attendant" as his reason, he was impossible to refuse.

As a side note, Erica had not informed her fellow comrades regarding lovers or anything of that sort. Due to Godou's orders, those details had not been disclosed to the magi of Sardinia and Sicily.

Hence, Erica also remained silent over the "lovers' relationship" issue.

"But my lady. You already mentioned about the seventh Devil King whose temperament requires reasons before he fights."

Clarens addressed the young mistress of the Blandelli family as "my lady." For Erica, this bald-headed Dutchman was her teacher in tactics, strategy and politics.

"That's right. Though he is a person who doesn't like to attack first, fighting in retaliation is fine to him."

"...Do you think he'll turn to attack?"

Gantz wondered as he pointed at the young Devil King shown on the television screen.

"That's rather twisted of him. So he's basically suppressing himself currently. As soon as he finds any minor pretext to justify battle, his fighting attitude will immediately escalate."

"If that's the case, all I can predict is a disastrous outcome..."

Clarens' cellphone started ringing at this time, and he took the call for a few dozen seconds.

"Bad news. Sir Salvatore has disappeared from his hotel."

"I also have a very bad feeling about this. Hey, how are evacuation efforts going in Castello Sforzesco and the surrounding area?"

The interior of Castello Sforzesco was being shown on the large LCD screen.

A residence of nobles in the past, it was now a museum. Forty knights from the [Copper Black Cross] had stormed into the premises in pursuit of Kusanagi Godou.

'You people must lead Kusanagi Godou to my location by any means necessary.'

In order to execute this decree, Clarens had sent out a suicide squad.

In addition, they were secretly ordered 'there's no need to risk your lives, just make sure you look like you're trying hard.' This was strictly confidential.

"On standby over there and at the designated time, all parties were contacted. Right now, police assistance is being used to seal the castle's surroundings and neighboring Parco Sempione. Also, within the castle--"

As Clarens watched the chaotic battle in the castle, he grumbled softly:

"There are not too many ordinary visitors since closing time is near. So that should facilitate evacuation efforts. We have already sent a very sharp team, so it should be handled well... That's what I really want to believe."

Godou's chaotic tactics proved to be an advantage.

He made the most of his strength against the combat troops trying to capture him. Using the [Bull]'s monstrous might to pick up a Gothic pillar, he swung it in a manner like an electric fan. He also threw with one hand marble statues that were taller than people. Seeing his enemies equipped with projectile weapons -- guns, he effortlessly picked up a 2m thick slab of stone to use as a shield...

Nevertheless, the current battle was taking place between an amateur against well-trained and experienced professionals.

In principle, the professionals should hold an overwhelming advantage in this kind of fight. But in actual fact, the situation was the opposite, just as Erica predicted.

"In other words, my lady... Is it time for the Campione to show his true power?"

"Probably. He's not going to behave himself indefinitely for sure . He appears to be under control, but could show off his true power in a moment's notice. He may be an amateur in 'combat', but in terms of 'tactics' he is surprisingly talented--"

Scarcely had she finished speaking when the ominous predictions were proven completely true.

Pictured on the television screen, in the air above Castello Sforzesco appeared a gigantic pitch-black beast.

Part 3

Sprinting into Castello Sforzesco, Godou rampaged wildly using his monstrous strength.

However, enduring to this point was his limit. He was gradually being cornered.

During this time as he relied on his monstrous strength to hold out, all the ordinary people and staff in the castle had somehow

disappeared... Hence, without further thought, he did it. Backed into this "It's gonna get dangerous!?" situation, he summoned the [Boar].

Blasting this castle away (together with the troublesome people) , was as easy as flipping a coffee table.

For this reason, the [Boar] suddenly manifested in the air above Castello Sforzesco.

The 20m-long black divine beast landed in free fall, its belly violently striking the roof of Filarete Tower in the castle's center. This impact shook the entire castle intensely.

Landing on the ground, the [Boar] resolutely smashed its head and body against the castle walls to its heart's content.

Naturally, the castle shook violently again. The stones and bricks used to build Castello Sforzesco were continually smashed and sent flying. In short time, the entire castle was on the verge of collapse. Not to mention those roars.

ROOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAR!!

These terrifying howls carried sonic waves. Consequently, even places that the [Boar] did not touch directly were spectacularly blown apart. The whole castle's complete destruction was simply a matter of time.

"If you value your lives, hurry and run!"

Godou yelled at the attackers in the castle.

Perhaps there was no need for him to do that, for they had already started fleeing all at once. Indeed, they were running for their lives in complete disarray. Oh well, all the escaping guys' faces looked like they were about to die. Even if they were not, they were definitely not retreating with any sense of composure...

Following them immediately, Godou also ran out of the castle.

From awhile ago he had already been transmitting to the [Boar] thoughts of "You don't have to destroy so seriously!" Surprisingly, it actually seemed to be taking effect slightly. It felt like the [Boar] rampaged slightly more obediently compared to before. Godou managed to escape during this time. As stones fell from ceilings while pillars and walls toppled, it was already troubling enough.

"I thought I was going to die, really..."

Running out of the castle, Godou panted heavily.

Behind him, the [Boar] finally pranced about delightfully, unleashing its full power. The red-brown Castello Sforzesco was gradually turned into a mountain of rubble.

ROOOOOOOAAAAAAR!! The roars were deafening.

With a final majestic howl to declare victory, the [Boar] apparently vanished, most satisfied.

Only the ruins of a completely destroyed ancient medieval castle remained.

Just as Godou was about to clutch his head and exclaim "How terrible" -- he stopped.

A blond young man approached. His handsome face was slightly familiar. Despite a slender build, he had the body of a trained athlete. Dressed sloppily in a shirt, cargo pants and sneakers, he was carrying a slender cylindrical case on his shoulder.

This was Godou's second encounter with Devil King Salvatore Doni.

"It's been a while eh? You're causing quite a riot, aren't you? Kusanagi Godou, you're exactly the kind of man I imagined!"

As soon as their gazes met, Doni began to cackle with laughter, and he even winked at Godou.

Amazingly, the "King of Swords" remembered the full name of someone he only met once and even repeated it correctly. Godou could not have known what a rare exception it was. However, he could surmise certain truths without being told.

This man seemed to truly adore Kusanagi Godou.

"So you're angry because I avoided a duel with you?"

Godou spoke gruffly and naturally found himself refraining from using polite language.

He was clearly speaking to someone older than him, but what could be causing this sense of being "peers"? Without any distinction of hierarchy, this man was on a completely equitable level--

"That's only a lie. I was simply pretending to be angry. But that's how I make everyone do as I wish."

Doni glanced at the members of the [Copper Black Cross] standing ready outside the castle.

With only a single look from Doni, they were already retreating. Even though he was frequently judged a fool or an idiot, there was a surprisingly majestic and kingly side to him.

Only fitting for the man feared by Erica and others. He was no simple fool.

"But anyway, this is wonderful. My instincts already sensed it last time. You are basically the kind of man who'd keep running away unless I pursue you."

"Pursue? What are you talking about?"

"Hey, didn't I invite you to a duel? But you refused outright. Clearly I was hoping for 'How about we go at it a little?' 'Great, let's go right now?' kind of exchange."

"Don't talk about duels like you're inviting someone for a game of Go or Shogi, okay?"

"Ah yes, those are Japanese board games. My thoughts exactly. In my view, drawing swords for a duel is no different from a Friday night game of chess."

Doni indifferently shrugged off Godou's criticism.

He was exactly the kind of fool for which retorts were useless.

"However, it's really great that you came to Italy. Even if I went to Japan directly, you'd probably ignore me."

"Wait a minute, even if I came to Italy, it doesn't mean I'm accepting your invitation to a duel!"

"How will it go? For you to go so far as to travel overseas deliberately, it really feels like -- you're in for a fight, seeking an eye for an eye to redress wrongs... That's the kind of feeling, is that not?"

Unexpectedly right on the money. What a troublesome fool he was!

Godou could not help but stare at the sky, exasperated.

"You should have listened to me properly back in Sicily. Anyway, all sorts of bad things were worth it."

Doni's gaze began to look rather strange. He seemed to be staring at Godou with some sense of camaraderie like meeting a rare kindred spirit.

"Hey, let's be more honest here, okay? You should argue more violently against me. So let's have a duel, it'll be really fun for sure! "

Saying that, Doni opened the cylindrical container and took out the "sword" inside.

--Sword!? Godou was rendered speechless. It really was a sheathed longsword. Even though Erica and others could easily summon their weapons through magic, Doni seemed to carry his sword personally on purpose.

"I'm not great at talking so I can't express my love through words. So let me use my body to make you understand what kind of man I am. Godou, I swear, I will surely make your heart burn with passion, and make you duel with me!"

"What do you mean, you're not great at talking? You just spewed out a whole bunch of words!"

"Maybe I'm awkward with words instead? Whatever, my ability to argue is really no good at all. Just as I thought, swinging a sword is way easier."

Doni unsheathed the longsword with a swish.

The blade measured roughly 80cm in length and was double-edged with a solid construction. However, it appeared to

be rather inferior in quality, especially compared to the likes of Erica's magic sword Cuore di Leone. Even a layman could tell that it was a coarse piece of mass produced equipment.

Nevertheless, Godou shuddered when he saw Doni holding the sword.

He had not entered a stance, but was simply dangling the sword limply in his right hand. The intent to attack or defend could not be felt at all. One could only describe his appearance as slovenly.

Still, it was terrifying for no reason at all. Godou felt a great shock down his spine.

Godou instantly bent over and spread his legs wide, like a baseball infielder keenly defending the area between third base and the shortstop. Rather than forethought he was guided by instinct which told him things would be dire unless he entered his most familiar defensive position.

"Amazing. What excellent instincts. Even though we Campiones resemble 'beasts' to various degrees... Yours seem to be particularly sharp. That's really similar to old man Voban, yes."

Doni leisurely expressed admiration, but Godou knew that was not all there was to it.

Before coming to Italy, he had learned about this man from Lucretia.

According to her, this swordsman, known as the "King of Swords," possessed characteristic authorities of "the magic sword which cuts through everything" and the "body of steel." And now, Godou was about to experience how terrifying he was, first hand!

--It finally came. Doni made a slash with his sword... Seemingly.

But Godou could not see it. Doni's arm and sword shimmered like heat haze and vanished. After becoming a Campione, Godou had been able to rely on his ridiculous level of concentration to see through all sorts of extreme speeds thanks to the effect of dynamic vision.

It did not work this time.

The sword disappeared -- or rather, it appeared to disappear. In that very instant, Godou jumped back obliquely.

If I didn't do that, I would have died. That was what he felt for no particular reason. Without any running start, he instantly jumped back as far as he could.

Following that, most likely less that 0.1 seconds later, Godou's former position was sliced through by a straight horizontal sword sweep -- that was what he felt. Since he could see neither the sword nor how it was swung, he could not be certain.

"Hahaha! Great. Those old men would always exclaim 'keep training the sword for 30 years' or something the first time they see my sword, and just as expected, it didn't work against you. That's only fitting for my kin!"

Doni was laughing cheerfully even though his target clearly escaped.

However, Godou finally noticed the shadow hidden in his pupils when he smiled. This was the best evidence that the handsome blond man here was no simple fool or natural airhead.

"Regardless of decades of training or any amount of talent, weak humans remain weak. Naturally powerful beings will be strong even if they don't learn anything in particular. Yes yes, only by fighting these powerful enemies can you really call it training!"

"Hey Salvatore Doni, tell me something. Was that magic just now or what?"

Godou questioned because his instincts told him it was something different.

"In other words, do you use magic to confuse people's eyes so that the opponent can't see the sword clearly?"

"Of course not. I don't mean to brag, but I can't even use magic at a super basic level. I just don't have the talent. It never sticks in memory."

Doni returned to his slovenly posture with his sword and hands down.

No mistake about it, this was the stance of the swordsman, Salvatore Doni. Like the pendulum batting style or the tornado pitch, these were essentially original forms attained by geniuses who underwent unreachable levels of training.

I won't be able to keep dodging that attack for long -- Godou believed for certain.

Meanwhile, Doni casually walked towards the remains of Castello Sforzesco.

The historical building had just been pulverized by the [Boar]. Even though its original form was no longer, it had not been literally pulverized to dust. The castle walls had collapsed and the central tower was toppled spectacularly, but the remains still hinted towards the castle's former glory.

In any case, Doni started speaking in front of the "half-wrecked" ruins.

"You have already displayed your authority, so let me show you mine. --I hereby swear, I forbid the existence of things I cannot cut!"

Quiet mutters. At the same time, terrifying magical power burst forth from Doni's right arm.

Godou was stunned speechless. The exposed right arm of the blond handsome man in the short-sleeved shirt had turned "silver. "

Brilliant shining silver. Not some kind of painted coating.

Unbelievably, Doni's arm had turned into a silver sculpture.

"This sword is the blade which slices through all existence. Namely, the invincible sword! Godou, this is my authority!"

No mere declaration, these spell words controlled magical power.

Using his silver right arm, Doni pierced Castello Sforzesco's wall with his longsword.

Instantly, Salvatore Doni's authority activated. Magical power flowed from Doni's right arm to the sword and then to the half-wrecked castle wall.

Slice. Slice slice. Slice slice slice. Slice slice slice slice slice slice slice slice slice slice slice.

A most extraordinary scene. With only a single thrust of the blade into the wall accompanied by a clang, the half-wrecked castle was instantly carved up by countless cuts.

These sword trails probably numbered in the hundreds if one could count them.

But the chance to do so had already passed. Carved by countless sword trails, the half-wrecked Castello Sforzesco proceeded to crumble and collapse.

It was not pulverized.

Tiny -- it was crumbling into fragments, cut to the size of pebbles.

'Salvatore Doni's authority of the magic sword could cut everything.'

Realizing that, Godou panted breathlessly.

A single sword strike had slashed a castle into tiny pieces. Struck by such an attack, even a Campione's ridiculously sturdy body would be sliced cleanly in half, or die from being diced and quartered.

Given Godou's situation, another troublesome issue was surfacing.

In actual fact, Godou had been secretly contemplating as soon as he saw Doni's sword skills -- As long as he could activate the [Camel] incarnation, he should be able to find a way to fight on equal footing.

The [Camel]'s ridiculous combat ability even won a fight against man-eating tigers.

Using this incarnation required heavy injuries in the first place. But Doni's magic sword truly belonged in the realm of one-hit instant kills. If he tried to take a hit to use the [Camel], Kusanagi Godou would instantly die on the spot. In any case, relying on the [Ram]'s super recovery would also be meaningless--

Godou trembled as Doni approached swiftly. His footsteps were truly light and fleeting.

Due to his opponent's exceptionally quick pace, Godou reacted an instant too slow.

By the time he realized, he was already within the attack range of Doni's sword.

Then the sword vanished. That heat haze-like great sword.

It was already too late for Godou to dodge -- was everything over? No, there remained the [Raptor] which he had used to oppose Melqart's lightning.

Only usable when approached by a super high speed attack, the incarnation of god speed.

Godou's vision, senses and thoughts instantly accelerated. Conversely, everything in the surroundings decelerated. Thanks to that, Godou was finally able to see the movement of Doni's sword. The blond swordsman was attempting an upward slash towards the shoulder.

Relying on the [Raptor]'s divine speed, Godou stepped sideways to avoid the attack.

As befitted the state of super acceleration. To think he was able to dodge safely. Godou proceeded to send a punch towards Doni's chest with his right fist. Even though it was a fight between an amateur and a master of the sword, given such a massive

difference in speed, he should be able to attack with impunity, right?

Thinking that as he attacked, Godou was met with great surprise instead.

The fist that should have smashed into Doni's chest deviated greatly to the right, hitting air. He had completely misjudged things visually. Furthermore, Doni said to the surprised Godou:

'Eh... Your authority's pretty interesting. Not only can it summon a divine beast, but it also allows acceleration similar to Alec's. There are apparently restrictions, but it does allow you to do many different things.'

Doni seemed to have figured out what Godou had done. He grinned foolishly as he spoke.

His voice sounded like a shout from a great distance. A rather unbelievable sound.

'But too bad for you, if speed is all you've got, I can easily see through it.'

What!? Godou shuddered to see him speak so nonchalantly.

'I have a slightly special way of training my vision. I gaze intently at falling rainwater and focus on a single drop. Once that is done, the slice comes next. If I can slice the targeted droplet cleanly into two, I pass.'

Godou was rendered speechless by this description which sounded like it came out of some master swordsman novel.

Nevertheless, his instincts told him it was no lie. Given the monster here, it was definitely possible. Be careful!

'This sort of vision, I think it's called the secret of the mind's eye in Chinese martial arts novels? I mastered it on my own, so I'm not too sure. However, as long as I know the key concept is about cutting a target with the shortest possible sword swing, it's possible to do it with that kind of feeling!'

Doni smiled cheerfully as he thrust his sword straight forward.

From Godou's view, this thrust was completely unbelievable.

Just as he looked like he was about to make a thrust, in the next instant, Doni had already entered the posture of finishing the thrusting motion. It was like watching playback in fast forward.

This was aimed at the center of Godou's body -- a thrust that attacked his chest.

Using divine speed, Godou dodged sideways, trying to evade at full speed. Nevertheless, it was a tad too late. The sword's blade had already reached the flank of Godou's abdomen, piercing slightly.

Under normal conditions, this would be nothing but a mere scratch.

However, the power of the "magic sword" infused in the blade penetrated Godou's right flank.

"Guh--!"

Spurt! Blood gushed out as intense pain erupted from all over the flank of his abdomen.

As Godou groaned painfully, Doni spoke as if nothing had happened.

'If only I had slashed more cleanly, I would have sliced you into pieces directly. Oh what a shame. But I'm not going to miss next time.'

In other words, he was confident he would not miss again -- the confidence to slice through divine speed.

The instant Godou realized that, he made his decision.

Continuing to fight like this would only lead to death by slicing. He could not survive unless he made use of his divine speed advantage in a different manner.

Enduring the intense pain, Godou ran at full speed.

Unconcerned that he was presenting his fleeing back to the opponent, Godou ran as fast as he could. Even though Doni's pursuit was terrifying, Godou was not obliged to fight back since that would only slow himself down... In order to survive, Godou continued running without even looking back.

"Retreating to regroup while there is still a chance to escape. What excellent instincts. Rather than careful consideration of the situation, he smelled the flow of victory."

After praising his opponent's instincts regarding the tide of battle, Doni stabbed his sword into the ground.

He did not intend to pursue immediately. Given the sort of extreme speed equivalent to lightning, such excessive speed was impossible to sustain indefinitely. Sooner or later, he was bound to slow down.

Just let those people from the [Copper Black Cross] chase him for now...

What concluded was merely the first round, but at least it offered the joy of battle. Or rather, it would be better to say the real match begins here -- Doni naturally twisted the corners of his lips.

Part 4

"So, the first round is Sir Salvatore's overwhelming victory."

After watching the two kings' face off on the television, Clarens took out his cellphone. Apparently he received a text. Gazing at the tiny LCD, he grumbled "Hmm."

"What's the matter?"

"A report from the knights at the park. Sir Salvatore has issued orders of 'Track down Kusanagi Godou.'"

"Come on, what a willful king who does whatever he wants..."

Gantz muttered after learning of the situation.

"It's about time for us to head to the scene. Tracking down a wounded Devil King could get dangerous. Not so different from wild beasts, which are more deadly when hunted in their injured state. Ordinary knights should keep their distance as appropriate."

While the two colleagues discussed the situation, Erica did not join in. Instead, she was immersed in her own thoughts.

(Godou, you're really unlucky -- Serves you right!)

The situation looked grim. Nevertheless, Erica maintained a calm expression.

Were she to reveal her emotions like an open book, it would be most unbecoming for a lady.

(I already warned you explicitly. But you ignored me and even came to Milan. You've really made a complete fool of yourself this time.)

Harsh and hardly elegant words swirled within Erica's mind.

With perfect self-control, she refrained from speaking her thoughts out loud. Godou's arrival in Milan was causing the [

Copper Black Cross] a great deal of trouble. In actual fact, if a little more time was bought--

As soon as Andrea Rivera was located and rescued, he could resume his duties as Salvatore Doni's chaperone. Then once Doni had enough of his mischief, Erica should be able to regain her freedom. But Godou had foiled this plan.

(He really is a dense block of wood!)

(Due to the Campione's gag order, the events in Sicily fortunately remained unpublicized. Perfect. Our relationship ends today. I'm not going to deal with such a foolish person any longer. After all, being sliced by Sir Salvatore is no different from being dead.)

(Yes, so be it, only death awaits.)

The blade wielded by Salvatore Doni, was truly a magic sword.

Even when it failed to cut an opponent into two, it inflicted magical wounds which failed to heal easily. Furthermore, since Godou had already used the [Raptor] incarnation, he was going to suffer backlash like last time. Then after that, his only fate would be a pitiful death like a dog's...

Unmistakably, death. Only death lay before Kusanagi Godou.

The instant she reached this certain conclusion, Erica frightened herself. Her chest tightened as if something was pulling tensely, while her stomach felt invaded by icy coldness -- an unbelievable feeling.

The beating in her chest quickened immensely. Like a fire alarm , her heart beat continued loudly nonstop.

He was going to die, right? Even if the [Ram] incarnation saved him from the current crisis, he was going to remain unconscious for who knows how many hours. Once he was discovered, it would already be--

"Hey Erica, weren't you in the company of the Japanese king for some time?"

Gantz's voice made Erica jump in surprise. Naturally, showing understanding of his words was nothing to be proud of.

Instead, she simply raised an eyebrow gracefully, making a face that expressed "What are you talking about?"

"How utterly heartless. Couldn't you say something about him being your comrade, and ask us to offer him a bit of assistance or something like that?"

"Watch your words, Gennaro!"

Clarens scolded quietly.

"Sir Salvatore only derived his convenient excuse as a result of our lady assisting Kusanagi Godou at Sardinia and Sicily."

"That's true, I guess."

"Since Sir Salvatore is already hostile towards him, we cannot cooperate with His Highness the seventh Devil King anymore. For our [Copper Black Cross], the most appropriate course of action is--"

Saying that, Clarens placed his hand against his neck and made a cutting gesture.

"Kusanagi Godou will be slain by Sir Salvatore's sword. Before the conflict escalates any further, if only he could die without a fuss, that would be for the best."

He sounded like he was analyzing a chess game. Erica agreed completely.

Yes, it would be for the best. For Erica and the [Copper Black Cross], the existence of Kusanagi Godou was simply a hindrance.

Though he may be [King], he was a Japanese who lived far away from Italy.

Furthermore, he had no intention of accepting servitude and loyalty from others. Precisely because of that, there was nothing to gain no matter how much she devoted herself to him.

Not to mention, there was the ruling "King of Swords" in close proximity...

Clarens' assessment was completely correct, reasonable, and more convincing than anything.

--The truth was so obvious.

But why? Erica found herself rather strange. Once again, she felt her chest tighten, as if she was about to face some kind of unbearable tragedy.

"But that king is Japanese! Japanese, yo!"

On the other hand, Gantz seemed to be objecting strangely.

"To me, Japan is a sacred land for pilgrimage! Well in fact, I happen to have some DVDs with me, wanna have a watch? Now that's real magic. These masterpieces can teach us adults that valor must always be tempered with gentleness. It'll transform your very being."

"I'm totally not in the mood for Japanese children cartoons..."

"...Yes, same here."

Erica coldly declared and left her seat.

"Where are you going, my lady?"

"I'm feeling a little unwell, so I'm returning to my room to continue my 'imprisonment' there. Clearly, there's no emergency requiring my presence."

"Don't call it 'imprisonment' like we're giving you a hard time."

Gantz frowned while Clarens simply shrugged without taking offense. With no one in her way, Erica left the lounge.

...Originally, Erica was indeed in a position requiring surveillance.

All things considered, she was the one who accompanied Kusanagi Godou the longest, playing the role of his support. The possibility existed for her to extend a helping hand towards Kusanagi Godou in his desperate time of need -- it was only natural for others to think that. But in actual fact, Erica's colleagues left her alone.

Undoubtedly. Unlike Salvatore Doni, no benefits could be gained from Kusanagi Godou. Erica could not be unclear on that -- that was what they must have thought.

Erica wandered aimlessly and found herself at the ground floor lobby of the headquarters building.

In the past, she always went home by calling for a ride to pick her up. But for some reason she did not do so today. Walking out the building, she began to stroll casually along Milan's office district.

Along the way, Erica jumped in fright many times whenever a black-haired oriental brushed past her. Clearly it could not have been the youth she knew but she felt compelled to check the person's face each time.

--Gathering her focus, Erica took out a certain object.

Just in case of emergencies, she had gathered this at the Zamparini mansion and kept it in a glass jar. With this, she could track down the location of...

"Where are you going, Erica Blandelli?"

A familiar voice. She turned around to find a tall man standing before her.

A handsome man with well-defined facial contours and a muscular body reminiscent of the statue of David. Wearing an unbuttoned formal suit, this man was named Paolo Blandelli.

Erica's legal guardian and commander-in-chief of the [Copper Black Cross].

"I've already mentioned this before. You are our precious treasure -- one who will inevitably stand at the pinnacle of our association."

"Yes, I remember. Uncle."

One could describe this as a conversation between uncle and niece, except with a bit too much posturing.

For a long time now, Erica's everyday interactions with her uncle had become a habit like a rehearsed scene. The two of them left the bustling main streets of Milan and came to a nearby park to talk.

"One more thing. Even though this goes without saying, you are equivalent to a real daughter to me. It's just that I'd be a little too young if I called myself your father."

Despite clearly pushing forty, Paolo still casually declared himself young. High-minded and noble in spirit he may be, this was one area he showed particular obstinacy.

Nevertheless, this facet of the heroic uncle's always made Erica smile.

"Yes, I believe it is all thanks to Uncle's love and edification that enabled me to become the person I am today."

"If you say it that way, even someone like me would get too full of myself. By the way, Erica, looking at the way you are now, really reminds me of myself over a decade ago."

"Well, when Uncle was younger, in other words, during your days as a youth."

"I'm young enough as I am, so nothing prevents you from calling me a youth. I hope you realize that some day. Anyway, enough with that."

Erica simply expressed acquiescence. Paolo continued:

"Back then, I was still a reckless brat overconfident in my own abilities. I only learned my lesson during a chance visit to England when I became embroiled in unnecessary hardship and burden."

"The hardship you suffered over there -- was it Prince Alec?"

Legendary deadly battles were innumerable amongst the experiences of Paolo Blandelli in younger days past.

He was most likely referring to the "Devil King's debut" incident of then sixteen-year-old Black Prince Alec of England, Alexandre Gascoigne.

He had crossed swords with the Black Prince himself as well as his right hand man, Sir Iceman. It was even said that Paolo battled a primordial demonic beast that the Black Prince had awakened, and stood in as the Black Prince's scapegoat to take care of a female devil who was targeting the Devil King.

Uncle Paolo's current renown was achieved through surviving countless deadly battles.

"Ah yes, that's right... Frankly speaking, given a choice I'd rather not deal with that kind of man who brings chaos to the world. In every instance, by the time I noticed, I was already embroiled in the commotions caused by Alec... Well, the troubles caused by a particular princess are no small number either--"

Distant events in the past. It was the reason why Uncle gradually stopped respecting the princess who was known as the most exalted noblewoman.

"I realized through those years of experience. How terrible in character, how troublesome and how willful these Campiones are... But due to my frequent contact with these abnormal existences, perhaps I've lost a balanced sense of judgment."

Erica stared wide in response to this rare story from his "days as a youth."

Uncle was not a man who liked to brag about his glorious exploits. In particular, he had always kept silent about his days spent in opposition to Black Prince Alec. Even though Erica felt he was being modest, it looked like there might be other reasons as well.

"Erica, let me be straight with you. You are extremely precious to me, whether personally or for the organization. I have no wish for you to suffer by the side of those unreasonable monsters. It is enough for me alone to endure that kind of hardship."

The uncle looked straight at Erica as he spoke.

"If possible, I hope I won't have to resort to force in order to play the part of the stubborn insensitive father."

"Oh my, you're speaking as if I were about to abandon Uncle?"

"If I am mistaken, just treat everything I said as a joke. Nevertheless, I can't help but feel that, given the situation -- so what is the actual truth?"

So that's what's going on? Erica could not find words to answer.

Was she still Erica Blandelli? Flawless in both elegant manners of speaking and fluent conversation skills, seemingly brimming with talent ever since the day she was born, Erica was unbelievably at a loss for words for once, she was silent!

"Given your intelligence and eloquence, it should be a simple matter for you to understand what I am saying."

Hoo. Uncle sighed.

Indeed. It was clear and simple truth. Erica should choose the [King] closest to the [Copper Black Cross], Salvatore Doni, and abandon the young eastern Asian [King] whose future was uncertain.

Nevertheless, even though it was obvious.

Despite their short time together, as ephemeral as sparks, she could still vividly recall every day she spent with the youth.

Everything that happened from the day they met up to this point. Such as tracking down the oriental warlord, fighting the Phoenician divine king, the whole story flashed before her eyes like kaleidoscopic images.

Erica took a deep breath and exhaled.

She reawakened her original indomitable spirit and glamor.

Holding her head high, she pridefully swept her hand through her lustrous red-tinted blonde hair. Erica Blandelli must always be

more beautiful and striking than anyone else. For her own sake, and as much as she wished to deny it, for that youth's sake too!

"Yes. I completely understand what I have to do. However -- it can't be helped. In spite of everything, I must go to his side."

A resolute declaration.

"I don't really understand the reason, but I want to help him. Although these senseless emotions vex me so, they are still my authentic feelings. Even if you give me a direct order, Uncle, you cannot force me to abandon my feelings!"

"Reason eh... I'm sure you already know very well."

"How can I know if you don't say it out, Uncle!"

"Which is why I say, your current attitude speaks more than words ever could... Come to think of it, I've never had this kind of ' family conversation' with you regarding this topic. A little later and you'd probably become too jaded to listen."

"You're talking like I'm ill or something. That's rather unbecoming whether you consider yourself a knight or a gentleman."

Erica turned away pretentiously and mocked cynically.

--Well, to be honest, it's not like I haven't realized what topic Uncle is referring to. In fact, I can think of all sorts of things the conversation entails. But admitting to it would be far too embarrassing.

Hence, Erica pretended she was completely unaware.

"In any case, I will be joining Kusanagi Godou's faction. Since I am doing that, I suppose there is no place left for me within the [Copper Black Cross]."

Using summoning magic, Erica called forth her beloved garment.

It was a short cape with straight red stripes against a black background. This surcoat was bestowed only upon Great Knights.

It carried protective magic that conferred defensive power equivalent to armor.

But most important of all were its "rossonero" colors of red and black. Wearing the association's colors displayed allegiance unambiguously -- To a Great Knight, this cape was equivalent to a bandiera flag raised high on the battlefield.

"I hereby return this, the mark of rossonero you bestowed upon me personally. Please accept it, Uncle. This could very well be my final farewell, but still, I must go!"

With one gallant motion she tossed away the cape she had worn for so many years.

As soon as she saw her uncle catch it, Erica swiftly turned around and began to walk away. She did not even look back once.

The uncle who said he would restrain her "by force" did not follow through on his warning.

After all, he was the one who traveled from Italy to England many times, taking on Princess Alice's requests as a knight, valorously battling the Black Prince repeatedly, the one and only Paolo Blandelli!

More than likely, he was the one who understood Erica's feelings best.

Erica continued marching forward. As expected, a voice to call her back did not appear.

Chapter 6 - An Alliance Once More

Part 1

Kusanagi Godou fled from Salvatore Doni using divine speed.

The seventh incarnation, the [Raptor]. Using this incarnation not only increased his speed, but also lightened his body and vastly increased agility and jumping ability. Even though it could not fly like a bird, it was still able to perform leaps that rivaled or even surpassed cats and monkeys.

Godou ran up a building's wall and moved between rooftops.

Sometimes he stepped on car roofs and trains on the road instead of buildings and ordinary houses, racing across Milan's main roads like a flash of light.

In any case, he had to run as far as he could. If possible, leaving the city of Milan would be best.

Although his pierced abdomen was feeling intense pain, Godou did not even consider going to a hospital. Shaking off Doni's pursuit was of utmost priority. Hence, Godou simply ran with reckless abandon.

...Thanks to the lightness of his body, the burden of running was greatly decreased.

There was no sense of exhaustion. No matter how hard he dashed, his breathing did not interrupt, nor was there any effect on his stamina.

Hence, he was able to ignore the pain on his flank in this manner. Just as he left the boundaries of Milan city, he ran into trouble as he entered an area with many trees and green fields.

Suddenly, his heart was struck with intense pain.

"T-This is?"

Godou was filled with doubt but he did not halt his footsteps. Nevertheless, the sense of pain was intensifying.

It felt like his heart was being stabbed by a murder weapon like an icepick. Rather than repeatedly stabbing, it felt like someone was digging relentlessly. Gradually, his legs and then his whole body became increasingly difficult to move.

"By the way, didn't this chest pain happen that time in Sicily as well? Could it be the side effect of using this kind of speed!?"

On further thought, this level of speed was truly ridiculous.

In fact, it was only reasonable to expect repercussions sooner or later given prolonged use of such speed. It was now imperative to find a place to rest. Finding a park before him, Godou entered with unsteady footsteps.

The park was filled with flourishing trees, like a little forest.

Halting his steps in a thicket, Godou took a break -- he finally reached his limit.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

The pain in his heart reached a maximum. Godou became completely immobilized.

He could not even lift a single finger, as if tied down and restrained completely. Godou collapsed, leaning his back against a tree trunk.

There was nothing he could do except wait for time to pass while he endured the excruciating pain in his heart.

Furthermore, the pain and bleeding continued from the flank of his abdomen. Only at this time did he realize another terrifying aspect of Doni's. To be frank, he was expecting the abdominal wound to heal simply through a Campione's natural recovery. But such wishful thinking was too naive. The wound on his flank was not healing at all.

This must be part of the "magic sword"'s formidable power. Unlike ordinary swords, it was a completely magical slicing attack--

Blood flowed nonstop while Godou continued to be tormented by the pain in both his heart and his abdomen.

Godou's exhaustion became extremely severe and his consciousness gradually became fuzzy. Soon after, his heart pain

vanished and the restraints were released. But still, his body could not move. Due to the massive blood loss, he was completely drained in strength.

A figure was gradually drawing near. On the verge of death, Godou summoned his remaining strength to call out:

"Yo."

With no more strength, all he could manage was a simple greeting. To his great surprise, the one who approached was Erica.

"Serves you right, Godou. This is your punishment for destroying Milan's scenery."

"This I am powerless to deny."

Faced with Erica's angry accusation, Godou helplessly acknowledged his wrongdoing.

"H-How did you find me?"

"Didn't Bianchi mention before? Magic can be used to search for and track down the presence of Campiones, you included. To think something like that existed. Just for fun, I took a strand of Godou's hair when we were at the Zamparini mansion."

It was a spell which allowed one to track down the approximate location of the target given any portion of the body.

Erica explained thus. She was meticulously prepared as always.

"Clearly we were trying to resolve this incident in a peaceful manner... But you came along. Are you sure you didn't usurp the authority of a god of pestilence and destruction?"

"....."

"I warned you explicitly not to come to Europe, right? But you ran all the way to Milan to cause trouble. In the end, you even got injured by Sir Salvatore's sword."

"I had no choice, I needed to talk to you."

Due to the blood loss making his head dizzy, Godou could not speak fluently.

"You also want to complain about the assassin incident?"

"That's included, but it's not the only thing. I was also concerned whether it caused great trouble for you. I thought that guy Doni was going to give you a hard time."

"Of course I feel troubled. In fact, your coming here makes me even more troubled."

"I'm very sorry, but I didn't want this."

"What?"

"When a conflict arises clearly because of me, and yet I stay out of it despite being involved. Neither do I want our relationship to end like this."

"What? We are separated by the vast distance separating Japan and Italy, you know? Besides, even if our relationship did end, it shouldn't affect Godou's life that much, right?"

"Wrong. I said it before, all it takes for us to meet is half a day's journey. Also, if I clearly know you're in trouble, I can't accept feigning ignorance to continue living a carefree life in Japan."

A busybody who won't mind my own business, or a stronger sense of heroism and chivalry than average? Overwhelming curiosity or recklessness? Or perhaps, I am just a natural born trouble maker?

Even Godou had no idea himself. Perhaps he was all of those.

"Then let's change the subject. Are you going to take me to the idiot?"

Erica did not answer immediately, for she had turned her face away. Without looking straight at Godou's face, she spoke:

"Actually I had been thinking ever since I bid you farewell on the phone. Precisely because Kusanagi Godou is a great fool who came expressly to Italy despite the situation, I should not care about him this time. It has nothing to do with a knight's merciful heart of compassion."

"Well, can't blame you..."

"But for some reason, I can't do it. To think there existed a man who completely disregarded his own safety and rushed straight

into the country of the most dangerous enemy, and even ran into a crisis. Not to mention, with absolutely no hope of victory or survival. I can't abandon such a man to his fate."

Erica slowly turned to Godou and said:

"I have already bid my uncle and the association farewell before I came here. I am no longer a knight. I am nothing but an ordinary girl -- I would never say this even if it meant tearing my mouth open, but I am just a girl who knows how to use magic and a sword. So that's the situation, you don't mind, right?"

"No longer a knight, what's going on?"

"Nothing much. Because I am joining you -- the faction of the youngest Campione, that is what I must do. So Godou, you have to take responsibility properly."

"Responsibility!?"

"D-Don't get any strange ideas. All I meant was that you must take responsibility by dueling Sir Salvatore and resolving the matter properly!"

Is that so? No, it must be so. How could I make that kind of misunderstanding...

Godou felt embarrassed by his stupidity as he frantically promised:

"I-I know that of course. Even the matter of Doni is fine. I will see this through to the end. I'm gonna teach that willful idiot a lesson."

"Oh my, you've said something reliable for once. But your pacifist banner is weeping."

Was she finally back in form? Erica jested lightly as if her mood had improved.

Although Godou was happy to notice that, he still forced himself to pretend to be displeased.

"What can I say. Because my opponent is an unbelievably great idiot. If the enemy was simply an idiot, there might be room for negotiations. But for a great idiot, nothing of that sort existed from the very beginning. So I might as well steel my determination and go all out in a fight."

Hearing Godou's assertion, Erica shrugged her shoulders as if amazed.

"Just so you know, a real pacifist doesn't make that kind of exception ... But let's overlook that or else it'd be kind of foolish. So Godou, let us form an alliance once more. Is that fine?"

"That's actually what I was going to request."

Godou forced his exhausted body and extended his right hand weakly towards Erica.

"Can you help me for a while? I did come up with a plan when I came to Italy alone, but to be honest, I'm at my limits."

"You're hopeless. Even though it's a sinking ship, I suppose getting on board in the first place counts as some kind of destiny. I will try to use my own methods to keep the ride going."

Erica also extended that gorgeous right hand of hers and held Godou's hand in turn.

They had already embraced, had intimate skin to skin contact, and even kissed, but holding hands was their first time. Godou smiled wryly at this unusual sequence of progression and said:

"By the way, you probably know this already... I can't hold on much longer. I'm entrusting things after that to you. You handle it so well every time..."

"Yes. I don't know if you can call yourself fortunate or not, but there's no mirror here."

Watching Godou with an amazed expression, Erica sighed.

"If you had a mirror, you could look at that dying face of yours. Completely pallid beyond belief, with these incredibly deep black circles beneath your eyes... You look exactly like you're about to bleed to death."

I see, as expected. Godou felt his consciousness slipping.

Like the last two times, he mentally called on the image of the golden sheep and used the [Ram] incarnation. Entirely defenseless while he slept, all he could do was believe in his "partner"...

"Enough! You're always giving me trouble, you know!"

Erica grumbled as she looked down at the sleeping Godou. Nevertheless, she realized she was smiling for some reason.

Most likely, it was due to her realizing his vulnerable state stood as evidence of his trust in Erica Blandelli.

"Well, whatever. In any case, it is imperative to secure a safe sanctuary."

Murmuring to herself, she thought of an idea. Their current location was a little commune outside of Milan called Monza.

Taking the train from Milan would take roughly twenty minutes. As the location of the closest F1 racing circuit within the greater metropolitan area, it was extremely well known to motorsport fans. Come to think of it, this area was--

Settling on a solution, Erica took out her cellphone.

Part 2

Impatiently, she could not wait for a night on the weekend to arrive any faster.

"Without any prior engagements for tonight, I should be able to focus completely on my project."

Liliana Kranjcar murmured quietly to herself.

Her current location was her own room at the Kranjcar residence in Milan.

"Tonight my thoughts seem imbued with particular clarity... I should be able to produce great work on such an occasion."

Liliana sat before an old-fashioned desk, her fountain pen scratching noisily as she wrote.

Letting her inner imagination soar unrestrained, she wrote essays, weaving them into masterpieces. Sometimes she wrote novels while on other occasions she wrote prose poetry. This was her secret hobby.

"Oooh -- Did I mess up? It came out a little different from what I imagined."

This was a romance novel in progress. The steady love between an unsophisticated heroine with a heart of gold and the perfect gentleman, a heartwarming story -- That was clearly the setting.

But gradually as she continued to write, the young man's nature began to shift subtly.

The young man who was supposed to be extremely gentle in the beginning, shockingly showed an unexpected savage side.

'I picked this specifically for you... Now that you have nothing else to wear, why don't you give up your futile resistance and put it on?'

'T-This shameless attire, I-I can't!'

To think that she wrote this kind of scene without realizing it.

The plot frequently placed the heroine in threatening situations at the mercy of the sadistic young man. Nevertheless, she secretly felt excitement in her heart, realizing she derived pleasure from being dominated in such a manner--

Unwittingly projecting her own feelings onto the heroine, Liliana halted her pen, lost in thought.

"Oh well, masterpieces tend to take on a life of their own... This is not bad actually."

She continued to write. Could it be possible? Did she also harbor the same desire to be toyed with by the opposite sex? Secretly, her heart raced...

At this very moment, her cellphone at the edge of the desk started ringing.

Glancing at the call display, Liliana sighed and picked up the call.

"I am very busy right now. If you have something to say, please make it brief, Erica."

'Greetings to you, Lily. Given our relationship, such cold words surely wound me in the heart.'

This was the voice of her rival dating back to childhood, Erica Blandelli.

"Do not act so familiar. We are simply acquaintances of the same age and belonging to different associations in Milan -- more appropriately, we should be called rivals and enemies."

'Showing such obstinacy towards your childhood friend is really your shortcoming, Lily. I feel like the bonds cultivated between the two of us amount to much more than that.'

"We are not childhood friends, it is simply ill fate! Stop fabricating friendship between us on your own accord!"

Having expressed her objections, Liliana asked acutely:

"By the way, you have been quite busy lately, is that not so? I heard that in order to seal a [Heretic God], you were sent over to Sardinia."

Erica Blandelli, went south on an expedition--

This news had reached Liliana's ears. However, the details were lacking.

The detailed happenings regarding the gods who appeared on the islands of Sardinia and Sicily were strangely unpublicized. It was as if someone had intentionally blocked the flow of information.

'You should be aware that a little while back, Sir Salvatore refused to leave Milan and even issued vile orders to the [Copper Black Cross]. Also there is today's incident of Sir Salvatore slicing Castello Sforzesco to pieces... Ah yes, and finally the suspicious matter of the seventh Campione's birth.'

Campiones appeared where gods manifested. This was common sense in the European world of magic.

Hence the rise of such rumors was not unreasonable.

"If we are really friends as you say, then I hope you can provide me with information regarding that man."

'Lily, friendship and work are separate matters. Mixing the two together is really unlike you.'

Just as expected, Erica was playing dumb.

'Well, putting our relationship aside, let me tell you this. The news that is about to be publicized, will surely shock all of Europe. Anyway, I simply called today to chat about casual matters.'

Really? Liliana felt suspicious.

She did not believe that the devilish woman would call for something of that sort. Perhaps this was simply the first step in her trap -- just as Liliana warned herself, Erica spoke up.

'Recently, I started liking this female author's romance novels.'

"Lies. How could you suddenly awaken that kind of interest?"

She knew Erica's tastes very well. Even though she liked to pose with elegance, any work of entertainment would fail to hold her interest unless it contained all three elements of action, explosion and murder.

'Oh my, I am in the flower of maidenhood after all. It's not so unusual to enjoy that genre. But the stories I'm talking about, that particular novelist's style, feels a little predictable recently.'

"Predictable?"

'Yes. Every single time, the heroine feels deeply conflicted about the man in the lead role, but the story always ends in her complete submission.'

Liliana was greatly shocked.

This was exactly the same scene she had just written. Come to think of it, all her recent works followed the same model. Could Erica have read them all!?

Her hand shook intensely as she gripped the phone.

Calm yourself. The finished works are all kept in this bedroom. Even someone like Erica could not possibly have laid eyes on them -- thought Liliana to herself. Probably. Liliana began to cough.

"C-Classic developments always follow the same plot. Nitpicking on something that trivial would be a bit childish, no?"

'That's true too. To me at least, it does seem a little childish. However, it'd be nice if the author herself could realize she's been rehashing the same plot. But based on the content, it feels like she is writing out her own hidden desires. Without realizing it, she released her thoughts on paper.'

"Ack."

Feeling like she was being talked about, Liliana was utterly terrified.

"B-By the way, is that all you wanted to talk about?"

'No, there's one more thing. I'm currently around Monza. The Kranjcar family's atelier should be in the area, right? I'd like to borrow the place for one night. Just use a mailing spell to send the key over.'

The atelier mentioned by Erica was a specialized workshop for restoring antiques.

When one made a living through magic, one would inevitably collect all sorts of antiques and artwork unearthed from archaeological sites. In order to perform private restoration without relying on university organizations, the Kranjcar family sponsored their own workshop.

"For reasons of your convenience or whatever, I --"

'Will not refuse, right? Given my relationship with Lily.'

Liliana sighed lightly.

Impossible to deny, this was her meddlesome childhood friend, Erica Blandelli. Highly skilled, talented, unscrupulous, and broadminded like a salon hostess.

Searching through her memories, Liliana recalled owing four or five favors to her.

"Well, I do not mind, okay. But for what reason? Facilities of this level should be available on your side, right?"

In terms of prestige and wealth, the Blandelli family ranked several grades higher than the Kranjcar family.

Realizing Erica's object was not the equipment at the workshop, Liliana felt suspicious.

'Sorry, I can't disclose anything regarding that. Besides, I'm sure news about it will spread like wildfire within the next couple of days, so spare me for now. Well then, Lily, take care. I will be quite occupied for the time being, but I believe things will settle down gradually.'

Thus the conversation ended. Seriously, what was that woman thinking?

Liliana angrily put down the cellphone.

Night had fallen completely by the time Kusanagi Godou awakened.

Naturally, Erica was by his pillow, watching him as one would gaze upon some kind of lab animal.

"By the way, the current time is late at night after 11pm. Every time you use it, the revival time seems to be shrinking."

"A power up, but incredibly annoying anyway... So, where is this place?"

"An atelier borrowed from a friend. Even though we've been friends for so long, on the surface we appear to be hostile rivals with a complicated relationship, so we need not worry about pursuers finding us here. In fact, the time spent waiting for Godou to revive was very peaceful."

The place was rather messy and felt like some kind of workshop .

On various racks were numerous tools, chemicals, shattered earthenware and statues, lying around without any sort of central organization. Rather than a bed, Godou was lying on a long workbench. The rug beneath him must have been a thoughtful gesture from Erica.

"So, now that Godou has revived, let's discuss our direction from now on?"

Just as Erica said, the abdominal injury had already healed completely.

His blood soaked clothes had also been taken off. Godou was now dressed in khaki work clothes. Probably something from the workshop. Looks like Erica was the one who helped him change.

Godou was gratified by her unexpected thoughtfulness, but he expressed his objections.

"Let's eat first. I'm famished."

"A statement characteristic of simple animals on the verge of death. Well, since I haven't eaten either, I shall second the motion, however --"

"However?"

"This area has no shops that stay open this late."

Godou went "Hmm" softly. Come to think of it, this was Italy. Even though there should exist restaurants that remain open for business during midnight hours, there seemed to be none in the area as suspected from Erica's words. Supermarkets and grocery stores would all be closed by now.

"I haven't seen twenty-four-hour convenience stores or the like in this country..."

"That's right. But they exist in Hong Kong. I thought it was a joke when I first heard about stores that stayed open for business twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year nonstop."

"Well, it can't be helped. We'll just have to borrow without asking."

Discovering there was a space resembling a kitchen, Godou muttered.

...Twenty minutes later, the two of them had discovered instant noodles, a kettle and a pot so they started boiling water using the gas stove.

Available in both cup and packet variants, they decided to take both.

"I knew that a workshop like this would stock some kind of food. But finding Japanese manufactured food sure is surprising."

The noodles Godou discovered were all imported products from Japan. Although the language on the packaging was Italian, the designs were identical to products in Japan so he recognized them instantly.

"As expected, demand for this kind of food exists everywhere."

Even though Italy was a great nation renowned for slow food, its supermarkets did carry frozen and instant foods. Even multinational fast food chains flourished in business.

Godou muttered as he was struck deeply by this revelation. Erica watched him from the side in amusement and said:

"Hmm, so it's ready to eat once you pour in the boiling water? I've heard rumors about this before, but I'm only seeing it for the first time."

"You've never eaten fast food? You're really a sheltered high class lady."

Once again, Godou experienced the difference in upbringing between himself and Erica.

As a side note, the tasks of pouring hot water into the cup noodles and boiling the packet noodles in the pot were all performed by Godou. They also found biscuits and candy in the cupboard.

Despite the haphazard menu, at least the meal was prepared within expectations.

"...This is unexpectedly tasty. That's not very fun."

"If you believe having these products taste bad would be interesting, then they won't be popular all over the world."

The cup noodles were flavored with consomme.

The packet noodles were packaged with soy sauce flavored powdered soup, the same as in Japan. While preaching to Erica the deliciousness of various instant and junk foods, Godou ate everything.

Also, while they were eating, the two of them discussed their plans for the future.

That said, the exchange did not amount to much.

"So Godou, regarding your counterattack against Sir Salvatore. Do you intend to return to Milan next?"

"Not yet. It'd be a little reckless. Continuing to fight that idiot on the battlefield he prepared would not be a wise choice."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been too passive. I think it's better if we start taking action from our side. We have to take back initiative in offense, right? Well, maybe it's a matter of feeling, but let's regroup here and do things my way."

During the daytime battle, Godou had been pressed so far as to be unable to strike back.

That kind of image must be vindicated. In order to take up the next challenge with renewed spirits, Godou intended to start the battle only when he firmly held initiative.

"In that case, I have a suggestion. I'll explain it after the meal."

"Great, I'll be relying on you."

Thus ended the discussion. However, it was sufficient. At some point in time, the two of them had developed the kind of

relationship where they understood each other without much being said.

Part 3

After finishing this late meal, the two of them spent the night at the atelier.

Since there was a bathroom as well as blankets prepared for naps, there were no inconveniences as temporary shelter. Sleeping under the same roof was no longer an issue that Godou and Erica harbored much objection to.

The next day, Godou and Erica waited until the time for shops to open before venturing out for new clothes.

The bloodstained clothing had already been taken care of, but Godou did not really want to be wandering the streets in work clothes.

They visited the men's corner in a three-story department store. Without much deliberation, Godou bought a white shirt and well-fitted pants. Originally, that would have accomplished his objective.

However, for some unfathomable reason, Erica was also picking clothes in the women's corner.

"It feels uncomfortable to be wearing the same clothes I wore yesterday. Since we're already here, I might as well have a look. But so far none of the styles are to my liking."

That was Erica's response when Godou wanted to leave.

Girls took forever to shop. That fact had been drilled into Godou's head through his countless experiences, forced to accompany Asuka or his little sister in their shopping. It could very well take an hour or more... Godou had this ominous feeling.

But Erica finished her purchases in ten minutes or so. However.

"Can you wrap this all up for me? Oh, this one I'm going to change into right now, but please send the rest to this address here ."

Most casually, she selected five or six days' worth of clothing before ending her shopping with those instructions for the salesperson.

"Hey you, didn't you leave your uncle?"

Godou asked Erica as she returned from the fitting room. She had changed out of her red long-sleeved t-shirt and was now dressed in an elegant black jacket and matching lower garments of the same color.

"In other words, you're running away from home, right? Where are you planning to send these clothes?"

"No problem. The delivery address is a place registered under my own name. It's part of the estate I inherited from my deceased parents."

"Eh, really!?"

"Yes. Even though I lived at the Blandelli main residence in Milan because I'm still a minor, I do have a number of houses in my possession. As long as I don't spend too extravagantly, it's enough to live comfortably."

Come to think of it, her clothing bill just now had been settled through the transparent accounting practice of the bank debit card.

Or should he say, as expected of Erica? Godou was deeply impressed.

Despite being a sheltered high class lady who did not even know how to prepare food, she possessed ample sense of economy . Even if there was no need for her to deal with the problems of balancing a home budget, she was probably not negligent in the management and application of wealth.

"I mentioned yesterday a stage for your decisive duel with Sir Salvatore. That place is located near a villa in my possession. The clothes were also sent there, so don't worry."

Finished outfitting themselves, the two head to the station. Even though they were wanted figures, they did not try to hide themselves or display any furtiveness. Instead, they openly walked along the main streets.

"We only hid last night to prevent Godou from being attacked by Sir Salvatore while you were unconscious. Now that you've recovered, Godou, there's no need to do things in a sneaky manner ."

"Really? Wouldn't it be bad if another attack happened on the streets?"

This conversation took place earlier in the morning.

"Don't worry, you won't be attacked. Even if anyone from the [Copper Black Cross] discovered us, they won't make a move so readily now."

Why? Godou's question made Erica burst into laughter.

"Sir Salvatore's orders are to track you down, not to capture you . Hence, the foolish act of a deliberate attack is not a command that would be issued, whether by my uncle or Clarens -- my former colleague. It would be dangerous and meaningless to them."

"I see. So all they're going to do is report our movements back to that idiot Doni."

"So let's send a 'Duel Invitation' to Sir Salvatore, exactly the way he likes it. Tell him to meet you at a certain place in a few days time. If we do that, I believe our chances of being attacked along the way will be essentially zero."

Since discovery only meant being monitored, the two of them openly walked to the station and took the train.

Before they went to catch the ride, they had already sent letters to Doni's hotel and the [Copper Black Cross] headquarters.

Erica had used a [Mailing] spell. It seemed to be a kind of magic that could deliver a sealed letter to a specified location as long as the exact destination was known.

The letters contained a message along the lines of 'Wait for me on the shore of Lake Garda tomorrow after dusk' and signed with the name of Kusanagi Godou.

The train ride took about an hour and a half.

Lake Garda was located right on the border between the region of Lombardy, where Milan was located, and the region of Veneto, which contained ancient cities such as Venice and Verona.

Italy's largest lake, Lake Garda, was elongated in shape, extending 50km in the north-south direction.

Godou and Erica arrived at a town on the southern shore of Lake Garda.

They decided to have lunch before taking a taxi to their destination.

"Somehow it really feels like I'm at the seaside..."

Sitting on the backseat of a taxi as it raced along the lakeshore, Godou muttered to himself.

Lake Garda's surface area seemed to be roughly half that of Lake Biwa in Japan. Along the lakeshore were scattered towns and villages that welcomed travelers as vacation spots. These towns all had a kind of seaside feeling to them.

The lakefront had a port where many yachts and ferries were moored at the pier. Although it did not really count as a beach, there was a lakeside cove covered with gravel.

"You can go swim, go yachting, and even windsurf, so it's not much different from a sea."

Godou nodded at Erica's comment. The lakewater here was amazingly clear and pristine. For sure, he could enjoy a good swim here.

A little while later, the scenery outside the taxi changed. The classic lakeside tourist destination scenery up until now gave way to lush green mountains overlooking the lakeshore. This seemed to be a place offering a picturesque mountain and ocean view.

After about thirty minutes, the taxi arrived at the destination.

The Blandelli residence -- or more accurately, the lakeside villa belonging to Erica.

On normal days, cleaning and inspection was entrusted to a caretaking company. This elegant log house, most suitable as a villa, offered a wide view of beautiful Lake Garda.

Erica used the key she had obtained from the real estate office in front of the station to unlock the door.

"How should I say it... This is essentially a rich man's villa."

Godou's mutterings reflected his commoner mentality.

That was his conclusion after a cursory tour of the villa, as he finally exited the garage.

The log house itself was neither very large nor was it especially luxurious. However, two vehicles, a small car and a motorcycle, were kept in the garage as if they naturally belonged there.

The car was a mini 4WD vehicle while the motorcycle was a 400cc mid-sized scooter.

"Is there also a boat on the lake?"

"Oh my, how knowledgeable of you."

"Given how well equipped this place is, I thought it wouldn't be strange to have that as well. Since there's no need to do any cleaning, how about we prepare some food?"

This was proposed by Godou who had experienced group training camps during his days as a baseball player.

As an ordinary commoner, especially one raised by a mother who subscribed to hands-off parenting, Godou always did everything personally by himself. If the occasion demanded, he was capable of performing decent cooking.

Besides, he did not naively expect this "partner" to contribute in this area. As expected, Erica, who had been acting completely like a sheltered high class lady since morning, asked incredulously:

"If you want to get food, there are restaurants and eateries nearby, you know?"

"Since visiting this place is a rare opportunity, preparing food by my own effort fits the mood better. Tomorrow will be critical, let's eat as healthy as possible."

"Oh... I'm rather confident in my ability to handle most situations flexibly."

Erica spoke with a serious expression as if deep in thought.

"As for the area of cooking per se, it is completely foreign territory to me. Oh well, a situation like this, which challenges the possibilities of me, Erica Blandelli, sounds rather interesting... To be honest, I've always wanted to create new tastes that have never existed in this world."

"It's simply outdoor cooking, there's no need for that kind of dangerous resolve."

Godou said no to the beautiful young lady who was more interested in tastes marked by individuality compared to safe but mundane tastes.

"Don't worry, I don't need your assistance. I can handle this alone."

"That statement makes me subtly angry for some reason..."

"By the way, who uses these vehicles here? Or heaven forbid, Erica, you can drive?"

"No, but if you need a horse, it's not a problem. Do you want me to bring one over from the ranch nearby?"

If someone could drive the motorcycle or the car, buying things would be a lot easier. Which was why Godou ventured to ask, but the result was an oblique answer. Since this was Erica, her answer was probably not a joke and should be half serious at least.

Riding a horse on the main road would be a bit too much, so Godou turned to the bicycle in the corner of the garage.

"So, let's use that..."

Hence, Godou biked his way to the nearby shops.

After shopping for ingredients, he set to work preparing dinner. Once complete, he went to the terrace which offered an expansive view of Lake Garda. The guest had already arrived -- Erica was enjoying the lakeside scenery.

"So, let's first discuss tomorrow's duel. It should be quite a severe challenge, but do you have a plan yet?"

Erica suddenly asked at this time.

Part 4

"Well, you can't really call it a plan, but through yesterday's battle, I figured out which powers don't work against that guy. That's kinda important, I think."

"Are you talking about the [Raptor] incarnation you used at the end?"

"Yeah. Totally ineffective. It doesn't really work when we're exchanging blows and sword strikes. Yes, its excellent speed is great and all, but Doni seems to be able to see through it. Also, my movements are severely off target."

Godou recalled what happened yesterday and explained to Erica.

Trying to punch but Doni easily evaded his fist. This was most likely due to Godou's excessive speed. After that, Godou had tested things out while he was running away using divine speed.

When the target was stationary or Godou was moving slowly, there was no problem.

But as soon as he tried to attack a moving object while he was going at those kinds of speeds, his eyes always judged incorrectly. For example, if he reached out to catch a dove flying in the sky, he would grab nothing but air, dozens of centimeters off target.

"Now that you brought this up, Princess Alice also touched upon it before... When Black Prince Alec was just starting out, His Highness was also in a great conundrum over how to control [Black Lightning]'s speed."

Erica spoke as she seemingly recalled something. Godou nodded.

"That's also speed on a level that's like cheating. If it could be used freely with perfect control, then that whatever prince would have become some kind of invincible monster, right? But that kind of thing should not be possible. From the way I can't hit anything with this sort of speed, that should be proof enough."

"Well said. But His Highness the Black Prince has succeeded in controlling his lightning speed to some degree."

"Since my power is different from that man's, it doesn't mean I can do the same thing just by copying. I think it's best not to place too much hope on it."

Godou felt neither fondness nor attachment to a Campione's authority.

Hence he could completely disregard his own powers -- in other words, analyze calmly and objectively.

"Anyway, first show me the stage for the duel before it gets dark."

Shelving the most pressing problem for now, Godou made his suggestion.

Erica's villa stood solitarily on the lakeside. But slightly further away, there were other houses and villas, little shops as well as piers with moored yachts.

Also, even further back in the distance, there was a mountain with a flat ridgeline.

Lake Garda was a glacial lake -- a lake created from meltwater gathering in a valley when glaciers retreated at the end of the Ice Age, resulting in encirclement by mountains.

Following Erica, Godou reached the top of the mountain.

"This hike is really pleasant... But I'd imagine it'd start feeling like a hassle if I had to do this every day."

Godou commented as he enjoyed the sudden outing.

This was a smooth and gentle mountain path full of lush greenery. Even though it demanded little physical exertion, the time spent hiking could be better used elsewhere.

"That's exactly the reason why my parents abandoned this villa."

Erica spoke as she walked in front of Godou.

She had told him that the stage for the duel would be an abandoned villa that belonged to the Blandelli family. Not only was it no longer used, but even the electricity, gas and water mains had been dismantled. She promised that it could be destroyed without any concerns.

"Not only is it extremely old and decrepit, it's also huge. A massive inconvenience, all things considered. But this kind of remote mountain villa happens to be my preference too."

"Oh well."

Even though it was a long journey on foot, it would only take a brief drive by car.

Godou began to imagine as he concurred.

A western mansion built on a remote island in a faraway ocean, a mountain villa hidden amongst snowy peaks, isolated locales where locked room mysteries[18] could occur were surely to Erica's liking...

"If it weren't for Godou saying no, I could've simply taken the car from the garage."

"Then why did you say no when I asked if you could drive?"

"Not an issue. You do know there are spells to make iron and metal move according to the caster's wishes, right? Given a car's scale and dimensions, no problem at all. It's simply an iron box on wheels with two people sitting in it. Then all I need to do is move the whole thing forward using my spells. I can't do any complicated maneuvers, but simply moving back and forth on a mountain path would not be a problem. Definitely."

"To think the urban legend of the driver-less autonomous car was narrowly averted, let's not go there..."

After hiking for thirty minutes, they finally reached the destination.

It was a majestic stone-built mansion in the mountains.

A cloister(!) surrounded a garden overgrown with weeds.

The building's walls were almost a meter thick, with elaborate carvings on the top of the stone pillars. Based on the style of architecture, this place was at least eight centuries old.

Especially the one-story lobby in the center.

It had an atrium with a stained glass ceiling that one admired by looking up.

Deep in the back was a platform resembling an altar, with a seven or eight-meter-tall statue of Madonna and Child.

Basically convinced that this was no ordinary building, Godou spoke up:

"This place, could it be some kind of especially ancient and precious building?"

"Not precious, but ancient for sure. This was formerly a monastery built during the Middle Ages. Many generations ago, ancestors in the Blandelli family bought this place."

"Using this kind of holy place as a personal villa would be sufficient cause for divine retribution!"

"Oh my. This kind of villa, may not be abundant, but neither is it very rare. Other than wealthy descendants of nobles, many other people own similar buildings."

"Ah... So these are villas where nobles live..."

Catching a glimpse into the lifestyles of the European upper class, Godou exclaimed emphatically.

"In this current time and age, there are no practical uses for these places other than converting them into hotels or museums. But this location at Lake Garda isn't very ideal from a business point of view, and it's rather doubtful whether the investment would pay off. Precisely because it's this sort of place, please use it any way you like. Any level of destruction is fine."

Listening to Erica's generous offer, Godou surveyed the interior of the building.

Considering the unreliability of his authority and the difference in combat ability between him and Doni, Godou wanted to avoid fighting in open country with nowhere to hide. On a battlefield without any cover, he would most likely be sliced to death in short time.

Not wanting to look a gift horse in the mouth, especially from Erica, Godou decided to make the most of it with gratitude.

As Godou nodded, Erica responded with a noblewoman's broad-minded smile.

"If you wish, Godou, I could also teach you basic swordsmanship. Even though a day's learning might not have much effect, at least it'll feel safer."

"Really... But no thanks."

Erica watched with an amused expression as Godou refused indifferently.

"Just as you say, using a day to do things at the last second would not be very meaningful. Rather than that, it'd be more productive to consider more fundamental strategies."

"Such as?"

"Areas where that guy's sword cannot reach... However, that alone won't be enough to win either."

As a batter, how to conquer a troublesome pitcher? As a catcher, how to guide the pitcher to defeat the batter? Godou began to ponder along these lines.

Rather than using sword skills acquired last-minute, he was going to fight that idiot in his own personal fashion.

This was the duel between high school student Kusanagi Godou and the monster Salvatore Doni. Hence -- this is going to be done my way.

In order not to repeat the failure during Melqart's battle, he must remember to respond craftily and avoid carelessness...

"How courageous! Fighting Europe's ultimate swordsman without even an inkling of how to wield a sword!"

Saying that, Erica laughed delightfully.

"But looking at your situation, perhaps that might turn out for the best. After all, simply using the [Camel] incarnation transforms yourself into a warrior even stronger than me. And unlike Sir Salvatore, you even possess incarnations with long range attacks... Furthermore, there's the [Sword] of spell words."

"That so? But Doni and I are both Campi-whatevers."

"Anyway, the fact that you both possess divine authorities remains the same. Two of Sir Salvatore's authorities have clear

origins. The [Ripping Arm of Silver] usurped from the Celtic divine king Nuadha, as well as the [Man of Steel] from the Norse hero Siegfried."

As Erica explained fluently, Godou nodded with a helpless expression.

"Well... I was able to sever just Melqart's power of [Storms] last time. I should be able to do it again with the same sort of feeling."

Verethragna's final incarnation, the [Warrior], wielded the blade of spell words. In order to obtain it, Godou needed to do that again with Erica--

Pondering to this point, Godou fell silent.

"That's... right. After all, I'm expecting..."

Erica also seemed to have recalled the same thing and suddenly began to be at a loss for words. Their gazes meeting briefly, the two of them instantly blushed at the same time.

"A-Anyway, let's prepare dinner first, it's about time to get back ."

"Y-Yes. Please indulge me with your cooking skills."

Unable to dispel the awkward atmosphere, they continued their way down the mountain path.

Godou's choice of dinner was curry.

Considering this was the result of his careful selection in an unfamiliar repertory as he browsed through food corners in shops, it was passable. That was what Godou thought. But unlike shops in Japan, curry powder was not available.

Stirring flour into a paste, he added all sorts of spicy seasonings into a pot, and adjusted the taste.

There was one camp where they had run out of curry powder, and Godou ended up learning how to make it from someone.

The other ingredients for the curry was chicken as well as spring vegetables he found in the supermarket.

He also prepared a large plate of salad. Using olive oil and wine vinegar mixed with salt and pepper, he improvised a dressing. There was also bread with hard crusts. Bought cheese and sausages, etc.

"...How unexpectedly ordinary, this food is so uninteresting."

"Stop having these weird expectations in this area..."

Bathed under the rays of the setting sun, Lake Garda was illuminated orange.

Despite their differing views on the food, Godou and Erica finished all the prepared food without waste.

Godou was not adventurous enough to expect Erica to do the washing up, so he cleaned up by himself. After that, there were no

other chores to be done. They had already bathed before dinner. (As a side note, the villa contained two bathrooms, thus there was no need to take turns.)

With nothing to do, the two of them sat down in the spacious living room of the villa.

Recalling the "ritual" they had performed before the battle with Melqart, Godou maintained a slight distance from Erica. He had a feeling something strange was going to happen.

Keeping his distance away from Erica who was sitting at a table, Godou sat down alone on a sofa.

"The first god Sir Salvatore defeated was Ireland's Nuadha, the king of the Tuatha Dé Danann.[19] A god with a silver-crafted arm to replace a severed arm, he is a war god who wields the sword of light which slices through all existence."

Erica suddenly spoke words of great learning.

"The second one defeated was the hero Siegfried. Bathed in the blood of the evil dragon Fafnir, he became the invulnerable warrior. He is well-known in Richard Wagner's operatic works, so Godou should have heard of him, right?"

Only on the level of having heard of the name. Godou listened silently as Erica proceeded.

"Other than these two, Sir Salvatore also seems to have slain one or two more gods, but the details are unclear. Since his favorite

authorities in battle are the 'magic sword' and the 'protection of steel,' it can be deduced that his remaining authorities are most likely unsuited for direct combat."

"Eh? Those kinds of authorities exist?"

"Prince Alec's labyrinth-creating authority would be a typical example... Anyway, Sir Salvatore's primary weapons consist of the 'sword' and 'invulnerability.' Given a choice of which one to seal, I'd choose the sword."

"Yeah, I'd pick that one too. But isn't it meaningless to raise these hypothetical situations?"

Unable to understand Erica's intentions, Godou felt troubled.

It almost felt like she was making preparations to forge the [Sword]. In that case, engaging Erica in that kind of behavior was required -- no good no good.

Godou frantically dispelled thoughts of temptation and spoke quietly.

"I already have a basic idea on how to win this battle. So, let's retire early tonight for a good night's rest. How's that, Erica? You should be quite tired, right?"

But no matter how early they should sleep, the current time had not even reached seven in the evening.

Definitely too early. But there was no other excuse to end the conversation.

"No, I'm not particularly tired."

"I-I see."

"Hey Godou, don't we currently look like we're eloping?"

"Eh!?"

Godou was rendered speechless by Erica's sudden description.

"Ever since yesterday, we've been fleeing together just the two of us. Living under the same roof in a matter-of-fact manner. What else could you call this other than eloping?"

"N-No, even though you could look at it that way, but we're not actually doing that."

While Godou stuttered in denial, Erica had already approached. Swiftly, she sat down next to Godou on the sofa.

"Isn't it more like friends or close comrades...?"

"Yes. As well as partners for life. Lovers bound by promises of eternal love."

What the heck was with this analogy!? Erica drew near as Godou entered a state of panic.

"Godou, if you could come to a profound realization and regard Erica Blandelli as your one and only woman... I could consider staying with you forever and ever till death do us part?"

Erica's beautiful face was approaching Godou head on from an extremely close distance.

By this point, Godou finally realized. Or rather, he was forced to realize. Kusanagi Godou's destiny was currently at a major crossroad!

Part 5

"T-That's overly intense, I think we need to calm down and consider things carefully first."

"Who do you take me for? Before speaking to you, Godou, I've already undergone careful consideration. Precisely because I understand the irrepressibly intense passion in my heart, that is why I am turning my feelings into action."

Not only beautiful but also intelligent, the young beauty confessed clearly and directly.

Why? Why was Erica saying such things to Kusanagi Godou!?

"B-But no matter how I wrap my mind around it, we don't really match, right?"

"Oh my, are you saying that I, Erica Blandelli, am not qualified to become the spouse of the seventh Campione, Kusanagi Godou?"

"Idiot, I mean the opposite. I'm not good enough for you!"

"In that case, you're the idiot. Foolishly worrying about the issue of matching when we should be softly whispering words of love and passion to each other. What a boorish person you are!"

Finally, the words of love and passion came directly from Erica's mouth.

At this rate, misunderstanding her was impossible. Erica smiled gently as she drew her face near the utterly shocked Godou's ear.

"However, I happen to like that boorishness of yours. A different kind of fool from Sir Salvatore. Honest to a fault, clumsy, boorish, brilliant on occasion but essentially naive most of the time -- Kusanagi Godou, that is the man I love most of all."

Despite the accusations of fool, these soft whispers were filled with loving passion.

"On the other hand, trying to justify love with myriad reasons would be truly boorish instead. Hey Godou, have you always thought of me as an arrogant woman? I hope you can answer me properly and give me an appropriate response."

"A-Appropriate?"

"You could say things like 'I also feel the same way about you,' ' a woman like you is not my type,' etc etc. Regardless, please tell me in no uncertain terms whether you accept or reject my proposal ."

Godou almost fainted from these sweet whispers by his ear.

"B-But this is too sudden. Something like this happening should be impossible!"

"Really? I too, was previously unwilling to admit to my feelings no matter what. Indeed, I was not sufficiently forthright with my affections... But now that I have made up my mind, I can easily understand that sort of feeling. Besides, if I truly didn't like a boy, would I really offer my lips to him?"

Even though Erica displayed slight embarrassment, she continued to talk happily.

If everything was as she described, then Kusanagi Godou was truly blind and insensitive.

"R-Really?"

"Correct. So, I shall now pose a series of questions to Kusanagi Godou. --To you personally, am I special? Or in fact, you feel like I am no different from any other woman?"

"T-That's not right. You are definitely special to me in all meanings of the word."

Godou ended up confessing unwittingly. Erica instantly smiled tenderly. So cute!

"Well answered. So, how was life in Japan without me by your side? Were you lonely? Did you recall each and every one of our exciting days together?"

"I guess I did recall..."

Another confession. Crap!

"Here comes the final question! Do you like being together with me? Or perhaps not? Which is it?"

"If I disliked you, I wouldn't have crossed oceans to see you!"

Damn it. His thoughts revealed by that unruly tongue, Godou was filled with terror.

This was a first experience. These words which his rationality forbade him to say, were all being uttered as a result of Erica's passionate advances!

...But wait a minute. Why did he even need to refuse?

Godou suddenly realized that neither Erica nor himself had a predetermined lover. Even if they got together, there was nothing wrong with it.

Ultimately, this was simply a matter of decision. He finally realized clearly.

"Ah... But it's only been a month at most since we first met. Isn't it a bit rushed to make such a huge decision given so little time? Maybe we should spend more time to gradually confirm each other's feelings?"

"Passion strikes like lightning, while love endures forever."

Faintly smiling, Erica spoke poetic sounding words.

"Even if all it takes is an instant to fall in love, the loving relationship can persist for the rest of our lives."

Not good. This forthright blonde beauty belonged to the passionate Latin nation.

In situations like this, the Yamato nation was completely outclassed in decisiveness!

Not to mention Erica's overwhelming appeal. Those excessively direct words of courtship. In fact, Godou had secretly felt himself attracted to her ever since they met in Sardinia.

He could not find any reason to refuse her.

Nevertheless, Godou was not the womanizing type to enter a lovers relationship given such short time. Besides, it would feel kind of insincere to respond to Erica's promises of "forever" without a thoughtful answer.

"Hohoho. If Godou cannot decide yet on our relationship, I won't mind for now. If my judgment is correct, you are acting the same way as I was yesterday. I can see that all you're lacking is the final resolve."

Tenderly smiling, Erica casually asserted.

Godou could not find words to refute her.

"Then let's put the matter aside for now, and resolve the most pressing problem? In order to prepare for the fight against Sir Salvatore, we must forge the [Sword]."

"W-Wait a minute. If that's the case, it means we have to do *that* again!?"

"Certainly. But there's no longer any problem, right? No matter how our relationship evolves in the future, we have already confirmed the connection between the depths of our hearts. Without any awkward excuses, let us enjoy the ritual properly now?"

"E-E-E-Enjoy!?"

"Isn't kissing a loved one the most natural thing in the world? Hoho, to be frank, during the ritual last time, my heart was actually racing so fast, I completely lost myself. It felt like my mind became blank as I was brought to ecstasy by our kissing."

"......!"

"T-That was my first experience, you know. Hey Godou, could you bring me to ecstasy once more? For the sake of prevailing over Sir Salvatore, let us do our best."

Saying that, Erica brought her cherry lips to Godou's mouth.

Some time after dinner, she had reapplied lipstick. Those brightly lustrous lips held terrifying fascination. Furthermore, having fully savored the taste of kissing her lips before, simply recalling the memory further intensified the situation.

Their lips were only one or two centimeters apart now. Godou felt his heart beating loudly like some sort of continuous alarm.

The desire to respond to Erica's passion. The desire to understand Erica's determination. The desire to not lose against that idiot. All these desires mixed and scrambled together.

He also noticed--

Erica's offered her lips in a kiss and Godou accepted.

"I-I'm gonna beat up that guy. Can you assist me?"

"Of course. This is the duty of your attendant -- or rather, your spouse!"

It was pretty much like a dam on the verge of bursting.

Erica acted with unusual ferocity. Sucking intensely on Godou's lips, it felt like she was trying to obtain Godou's entire being through a kiss.

Keeping their lips in superposition, they pressed together even more tightly.

Ten seconds, twenty seconds passed in this fashion. Still, Erica's lips remained in position. Only when out of breath did she finally release her lips, panting heavily for air.

But very quickly she offered another kiss.

As if putting forth her full strength, a kiss full of passion.

Overwhelmed by this sweet pleasure, Godou felt his mind going numb.

As a result, he too, gradually responded to the intensity of Erica's passion. When Erica sucked on Godou's lips, Godou sucked Erica's lips in turn, licking each other.

Gripping the other's lips with his own, he savored that sense of softness, wetting it with saliva.

The air echoed with the sound of wet kisses. In short time, the two of them were kissing each other's lips with ever increasing intensity. Before they knew it, even their teeth were colliding together.

This time, the sound of teeth crashing could be heard.

To be honest, it was kind of painful.

Hence, their tongues started to tangle with each other. Sliding their tongues into each other's mouth, probing for the other tongue , they each tried to encircle the other person's tongue.

The area around their mouths became all wet and sticky from saliva.

"I-It's about time for me to start teaching you the most important knowledge. Sorry, I was lost in ecstasy."

Erica whispered softly as if she had recovered her senses.

"For someone like me to completely forget something crucial like that, my current state must be really strange. And kissing so much more intensely than last time... Godou, it's you who changed me."

Grumbling with dazed eyes, Erica began to weave spell words together.

"The god Sir Salvatore defeated was Nuadha, the king of the Tuatha Dé Danann. This divine clan consisted of deities worshiped by Celts living in Ireland."

Erica kissed Godou's lips as she continued to whisper.

"People generally have the impression that the Celts were indigenous to the European continent, and later driven out by the invasion of the Anglo-Saxons."

Taking a breath from time to time, Erica continued to engage in either kisses or low whispers.

Sweetly pleasurable beyond compare, this was also a frantic and awkward exchange. Better yet, Godou could feel something connecting together in the depths of his heart.

"But if events were traced all the way back, the Celts are the actual invaders. Migrating over vast distances, they traveled from India to Europe, eventually crossing from the continent to the British Isles. The Celts who arrived in Ireland battled the natives, undergoing countless victories and defeats, finally succeeding in making the island their territory."

Before they knew it, kissing no longer offered sufficient satisfaction. Embracing Erica tightly, using his entire body to affirm her supple sensations, Godou immersed himself in these thoughts with rapture.

"Bearing a silver arm and the sword of light, the god Nuadha was also the king of the Tuatha Dé Danann. His myths clearly depict the figure the ancient Celtic king who commanded his people in their conquest of Ireland. Understand all this and forge the knowledge into the god-slicing blade, Godou!"

Like a gushing torrent, knowledge of the Celtic divine king Nuadha was transmitted through Erica's mouth and tongue.

Godou could feel the [Sword]'s completion with conviction.

Thus was born the golden blade for slicing apart a god he had never encountered before.

Chapter 7 - King of Swords

Part 1

"It's been a while, my beloved Andrea! I was so worried about you!"

"Stop spewing nonsense! You are the worst of trash and the greatest of idiots, Salvatore Doni!"

On a warm spring night, in a bar lounge of a high class hotel in Milan.

A heartwarming reunion between two young men who had been separated for a fortnight. Furthermore, Italian media had exploded yesterday with the headlines "Castello Sforzesco, Collapsed!" believed to be perpetrated by left-wing extremist criminal organizations.

Obviously, this news was fabricated to conceal the truth.

Even more obvious than that, one of the culprits was right here -- Salvatore Doni.

"I never thought you would kidnap and imprison me for the sake of causing that kind of commotion..."

Andrea Rivera thundered with anger.

Popularly known as the "King's Butler," his duties included attending to and monitoring Doni who was out of touch with modern society.

One to do things meticulously, Rivera had always dressed impeccably. But today, he was wearing neither a tie nor a jacket. This was way too early for Cool Biz though.[20]

As things happened, only four hours had passed since he was rescued from mysterious kidnappers.

Liberated from the Genoa station, Rivera immediately contacted all parties to get up to date and hurried over to his master in Milan . Still dressed in the clothes he was wearing as a prisoner, he had not spent any time on making himself presentable.

The exchange just now were their first words to each other.

"You're mistaken, Andrea. I had no idea you were even kidnapped. I was even wondering why I haven't seen you lately."

"Undoubtedly only you could have been responsible!"

Unshaven stubble on his face, Rivera angrily accused his master .

They were able to maintain this manner of speaking between equals only because they were already friends before Doni became [King]. As a side note, no other customers were present in the bar lounge apart from the two of them.

The only bartender at the counter waited silently on standby.

Since the business running the hotel was affiliated with the [Copper Black Cross], this place was automatically reserved for Doni every time he casually strolled into Milan.

Taking a seat at the counter, Rivera ordered a drink.

"A straight whiskey please. Any brand will do."

"When did you suddenly let yourself go? Be careful not to drink too much."

"Because I have to clean up your messes, I'll be goddamned busy starting tomorrow! How could I not drink!"

Maintaining his silence, the bartender swiftly prepared the drink.

The amber-colored liquid filled the shot glass. Rivera spoke as he drank.

"Getting a prestigious magic association involved, turning a famous Milan landmark into rubble, instigating trouble with the seventh Campione for no good reason. If news of all this gets out, who knows how many people in Europe will be shocked senseless. The spread of information must be contained at all costs..."

"You're still the same old Andrea, always getting worked up over matters of mere appearance."

"Damn you and your appearances! This is prudence and common sense! By the way, is it tomorrow? Or the day after?"

Seeing Doni not ordering anything, Rivera questioned.

The Campione of Swords was a man completely foreign to asceticism. Normally, he ate more than double a normal person's portion. However, he did not even drink a drop of water this night .

"It's tomorrow. My courtship finally bore fruit."

Doni waved Kusanagi Godou's "Duel Invitation" as he muttered .

Whenever he was about to face an important battle, he always abstained from food and drink.

Scientifically speaking, such abstinence was neither efficient nor meaningful.

Nevertheless, the sensation of thirst and hunger was able to make his "sword" sharper than usual--

(On the other hand, given the counterexample of times when he greedily stuffed himself with food and drink to store energy like a bear before hibernation, perhaps it was simply a matter of mood. Ultimately, he was a man who could not be explained through science.)

In any case, the Campione of Swords had entered a state of battle.

"Enduring this hardship will be worth it. This time my opponent is also filled with fighting spirit. He never admits it out loud, but I'm pretty sure I'm always on his mind."

"Well, because your opponent is also a Campione."

As the butler who served a member of this race for four years, Rivera exclaimed as he was struck by a wave of emotions.

"After all, since it has already come to this! After you die, I will take care of the aftermath in accordance with your will. Any objections?"

"Ah, that thing you forced me to write down a while ago. Sure, as you wish."

As expected of my friend. Doni grinned craftily.

As the Devil King's butler, Rivera was fully informed of what kind of person the current enemy, Kusanagi Godou, was. Completely unversed in martial arts and magic, a Japanese student with only limited battle experience. Based on logic, there did not exist a single element that would lead to Doni dying -- or even losing.

Nevertheless, Rivera already planned ahead for the possibility.

Despite their human appearances, Campiones were more akin to "beasts" in nature. Even if they knew nothing of swords and magic, or had zero experience in hunting or battle, they easily and naturally obtained power during combat.

Probably because that was their nature, they were able to slay a god in the first place.

Or perhaps through slaying a god, they obtained that sort of nature?

Doni had no answer to this question. In any case, even if he and the rest of the god-slayers were all beasts, he was a mutant who dared to entrust his destiny to the sword. Other than fighting gods and god-slayers repeatedly, there was no other way to train sword skills that worked on them alike. Hence he must fight.

Following this cheerful and simplistic line of thinking, Doni looked forward to the duel tomorrow.

Salvatore Doni and Kusanagi Godou. Spending the night separately, they welcome the arrival of the next day.

Doni arranged a ride with the [Copper Black Cross] and had them transport him to the shore of Lake Garda. This trip from Milan took less than two hours. Meanwhile, Kusanagi Godou was waiting at the building designated as their battle stage.

On this late April weekend, the sun was setting in the west. The domination of darkness was arriving.

This former monastery, abandoned villa, and example of Romanesque architecture was where the two Campiones met once again. They were currently located in a vast space on the second floor that had been used as a dance hall.

"I've eagerly and impatiently waited for this moment, Godou. I'm currently so touched!"

"I'm the opposite. In fact, I'm in a particularly foul mood right now."

Doni exclaimed with joy as Godou scowled.

A night breeze blew in through the window. The spring constellations should be visible from outside. Clearly it was such a pleasant night, but Doni took out his sword from his cylindrical case.

"Why don't you find something to wield? This doesn't feel too right."

"Give me a break. I'm not going to violate any weapons and firearms regulations."

Towards Godou and his faithful adherence to the laws of his home country, Doni displayed a thoughtful expression as he muttered:

"I see. Then it can't be helped. Even though it's slightly embarrassing... Oh well, just slightly. Because Campiones are equal, there's no need to mind such things."

"You, there should be limits to how much of a useless human you can be!"

Godou finally called this older opponent "you" in a derogatory manner.

Italy and Japan. The two countries were too far apart in distance . Nevertheless, the two of them felt strongly about each other, recognizing each other as the kin who left the strongest impression --

Perhaps their strange bonds of fate truly began at this very moment.

"I will pay you back for that slice, as well as what you owe for the hardship Erica and her faction endured... Let's settle things here, Salvatore Doni!"

"Hohoho. You look like you have some sort of plan. As you wish, Kusanagi Godou!"

Doni responded sharply as he watched Godou throw a glance out the open window.

Nevertheless, he did not try to figure what his enemy was thinking. Trying to think would prevent him from fighting. Emptiness of mind was Salvatore Doni's true skill, the basis for the sword of nothingness in thought.

I shall entrust everything to my body, my arm and my sword.

His thoughts were not applied towards how the sword was controlled. The body and the sword moved naturally in accordance to the heart.

On the other hand, Kusanagi Godou did not have a skill to entrust destiny to an empty state of mind. Using his own power together with his comrade's in a flexible and adaptive manner, he faced battle head on.

Kin and peers who contrasted with each other in various ways. A spectacular duel was about to begin.

The rematch with Doni was imminent. The previous fight ended with Godou fleeing from the scene of battle. Using a baseball comparison, the current setup was like a rookie pitcher forced to face a formidable star batter in a direct confrontation with no way out.

Recalling traumatic memories of the previous overwhelming defeat would be very unsettling--

Like pitching a high inner corner fastball aimed at the batter's hands, Godou was going to emphasize he had progressed massively from before.

'Hey Erica, am I allowed to use this ancient villa in this manner? '

'Of course, I'm fine with it... Seriously, you are not only a hypocritical pacifist but also surprisingly unscrupulous.'

After telling his partner the plan he came up with, that was the kind of comment he received.

In any case, he had the owner's permission. Godou pitched a dangerous ball without hesitation.

"Come forth! This time, I allow you to rampage as much as you want, so hurry here!"

Godou summoned Verethragna's fifth incarnation, the [Boar].

ROOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAR!!

Familiar roars resounded all over the place. From beneath -- directly below the villa, or in other words, from the ground.

This overly extravagant abandoned house is my gift to you. In return, wreak as much destruction as possible for me! Responding to Godou's thoughts, the black gigantic beast suddenly manifested.

Like a missile being fired straight up from the ground, the [Boar] jumped vertically!

It penetrated the villa's foundations, first and second floors as if they were made of paper. The black beast's head, snout and tusks only flashed before the two Devil Kings' eyes for an instant.

Of course, the perpetrator Godou had foreseen this already.

Traversing through the window, he leaped into the air without hesitation. Outside the house, directly below, he had already prepared a mattress that dated back to the building's days as a villa in use. Given a Campione's sturdy body, this level of safety precaution was more than sufficient.

--In the instant he jumped out the window, Godou witnessed Doni striking downwards repeatedly with his sword.

"Haha, what an unexpected move!"

The King of Swords was happily laughing away, not even showing a single shred of fear in the face of this nonsensical preemptive strike. Calmly, he counterattacked with a slash. Needless to say, his right arm was shining with silver brilliance of course.

In theory, the sword's blade should have hacked apart the head of the [Boar] that was jumping straight up.

After all, in a contest of ridiculousness, this man deserved a gold medal--

Godou was utterly amazed. After all, that magic sword was able to slice the entire Castello Sforzesco into rubble. Splitting the 20m-long divine beast cleanly into two would not be out of reason. However.

ROOOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAR!!

Creating sonic waves, the [Boar] produced roars accompanied by ultrasound.

"Waaaaaaaah!"

Just as the sword was inches from striking the [Boar], the sonic waves blew Doni away forcefully. Immediately after that, the [Boar] cleanly penetrated the villa's second floor and roof, flying into the sky above Lake Garda.

"I guess in terms of ridiculousness, the [Boar] does not lose to Doni..."

Finally landing on the mattress, Godou muttered in wonder. Even though he had crouched out of habit and his foot struck his bottom, he did not suffer anything more serious than slight pain on his foot and bottom.

The majestic gigantic beast kept rising through the moonlit sky like a rocket.

Already familiar with the summoning, Godou realized with a surprise. What a convenient monster it was. Compared to the other incarnations, its ease of use was overwhelming.

The beast that could only be summoned with the intent of destroying a massive object.

In other words, this was the only incarnation that could be used freely according to Godou's will. The [White Stallion] provided the greatest firepower while the [Warrior] may be the most versatile, but if ease of use was factored into the equation, the [Boar] was truly the ultimate trump card.

"Oh yeah...? Was my intuition mistaken?"

Godou suddenly noticed. Perhaps, this was actually not a beast that was summoned to fulfill the wish of destroying something.

Instead, destroying an object was simply the condition for summoning the beast. Once manifested, the [Boar] was only guided by its goal of destruction, merely responding to Godou's orders cursorily on whim.

"...You think I wouldn't know?"

Probably best to keep the latter possibility a secret. Godou secretly grumbled to himself.

"No matter what, calling that guy out always causes widespread destruction. I have to be careful."

Godou gave himself a self-reminder as he looked towards the villa. The [Boar] in the sky reached its maximum height and began to fall. Not only was it falling, but it was also crashing down rapidly.

ROOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAR!!

The ferocious roar displayed the beast's fighting spirit. Treating the villa as its target of destruction, the [Boar] crashed down from above like a flying body press. It intended to smash the villa to smithereens using its monstrous gigantic body. However, Godou saw it.

Standing in a corner on the roof, a blond handsome man appeared with his sword. Doni. Godou had no idea how he survived the [Boar]'s sonic waves, but he seemed lively and healthy!

"O Sword that pierces enemies with but a single swing. For the sake of plundering all life from creation, shine with brilliance!"

Doni called out spell words and launched his sword in the manner of throwing a javelin.

Infused with authority of the magic blade, the sword flew through the air. Its target was the defenseless belly of the rapidly descending giant beast. The [Boar] proceeded to emit its usual roars.

ROOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAR!!

The invisible sonic waves blew away Doni's thrown sword -- that was what one would reasonably expect. However, a liquid metal resembling mercury gushed out from the flying sword, taking on a massive elongated shape.

The liquid silver instantly solidified to become a giant "magic sword."

An exceptionally large magic blade measuring seven or eight meters long. Even as an improvised creation, it surprisingly resembled a sword in form.

ROOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAR!!

Were it a sword of ordinary size, the divine beast's sonic waves would probably blow it away easily. However, it did not work against a sword of such ridiculous dimensions.

Completely unaffected by the sonic waves, the gigantic silver magic blade continued its flight, striking the [Boar]'s belly and completely piercing through.

Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!

Painful howls on the verge of death. This sword had ended the [Boar]'s life. Nevertheless, the black divine beast displayed its formidable will at this time. Even skewered, it continued its swift descent towards the villa.

Measuring 20m in body length, it probably weighed a couple hundred tons.

With that kind of monster crashing down on its gigantic belly, no villa could have survived no matter how grand or vast its scale.

Naturally, it was demolished. Whether the roof, the ceilings, structural beams, pillars, walls or floors, all were crushed and pulverized without exception.

Immediately after that, the [Boar], skewered by the giant magic blade, vanished in a puff of black mist.

However, its foe, Salvatore Doni should have been on the roof top of the villa demolished by the divine beast, what happened to that guy -- ?

Focusing his gaze, Godou found a figure in the flying dust cloud amidst the debris.

He nodded. What a piece of cake it would be if victory could be obtained like this. However, he did not believe that man could fall so easily. The battle had not ended yet.

Part 2

"Good job, Godou. So amazing! I've fought all kinds of enemies before but rarely have I ever been struck by such a powerful preemptive strike!"

Yelling out with an utterly delighted expression, Doni was completely unharmed. Close to a hundred symbols resembling cuneiform appeared all around him as if protecting him. Based on the shapes, they were probably Norse runes.

This was Doni's [Man of Steel] authority which conferred an invulnerable body.

"If that's the case, I really should counterattack in a manner no less spectacular than yours."

For some incomprehensible reason, the handsome blond was grumbling in a completely serious tone of voice.

"But I don't have anything fancier than swordsmanship. My duels have nothing to do with glamor. On the other hand, the flashiness of your many varied skills and abilities are so nice..."

"What you did just now was flashy enough already!"

"Eh, really? Then let's continue."

Retorted by Godou, Doni bent over and picked something up.

It was his giant magic blade from before that was buried in the rubble.

Staring at it once again, Godou could not help but feel astonishment at how ridiculous the sword looked.

The blade itself measured almost 8m in length while the hilt was about 1m or so.

Proportionate to its length, the blade was also wide and of a sturdy and heavy construction. Hiding a child-sized object behind the sword would be a most simple matter.

Doni stood at 185cm tall or so. The length of the sword was essentially four times his height in scale.

Wielding the long and massive sword without losing balance, the silver-armed Campione swung it using one hand with the sound of slicing wind. The scene was utterly ridiculous.

"...Before I offer my opinion for reference, let me ask something first. Is that thing lighter than it looks?"

"I've never weighed it before, but it's probably more than 300kg ? However, since it's made of the same substance as my arm, I can move it freely as if it were my own arm or leg."

Smiling proudly, the silver-armed Campione replied.

"Hohoho, the enemies of us Campiones are not limited to fellows in human form. There are times when we must fight freaking huge divine beasts or demonic deities. In order to chop them apart in frontal combat, I created this mystic sword!"

"Making your own sword huge to fight gigantic enemies, that's such a dumb idea!"

While he criticized, Godou truly felt terror in his heart. Indeed there should be limits to foolish notions. However, what if it happened to be backed by logical reasons?

If Doni was able to swing the weapon freely despite its ridiculous length and weight--

"So, let's try something flashy."

Doni finally entered a stance with the massive magic blade.

Holding the hilt with both hands, he pointed the 8m blade towards Godou in a manner similar to spear-armed heavy infantry , completely different to his earlier posture just now.

The two were separated by roughly 15m.

But given the massive magic blade, the distance could be easily crossed. Yesterday, Godou had mentioned it would be best to stay out of reach from Doni's sword. Obviously, this did not count as particularly brilliant insight. But he never expected the sword to grow in length as well.

Hoo. Godou exhaled. Finally it was time for a decisive direct confrontation. Now was the time to counterattack his opponent, the higher ranking [King]. Thinking calmly, he counted the number of incarnations at his disposal.

He confirmed three incarnations as being usable. Then he will go all out and pit them against his enemy!

"Skills must carry power -- no matter how godly a skill, without matching "power," one would simply fail and be slaughtered in the end."

Doni quietly uttered words that seemed to be some kind of key to swordsmanship.

These too, were spell words. In order to pour magical energy into the giant silver magic blade, infusing it with greater deadly formidable power. Then Doni aimed a "thrust" at Godou.

He attacked as he took a giant step forward.

The long silver blade sped straight towards Godou like an arrow.

"Damn, you really can use it normally!"

Cursing away, Godou jumped sideways and evaded the giant magic blade.

Just barely. Had he been fractions of a second too slow, he would have been sliced into two by the ridiculous blade. The situation had become that terrifying.

"I am the strongest, crushing all who stand in my way!"

Chanting Verethragna's scripture, Godou used the [Bull] incarnation which required an enemy possessing great strength beyond normal parameters. Against this quickly swinging massive magic blade, the "strength" behind it was all it took to satisfy the condition.

Godou ran over the mountain of rubble created by the [Boar].

Nothing remained of the house's original shape. The various building materials comprising the ruins were open to view. Pillars, sculptures, walls, floors, ceilings... All sorts of debris.

Godou discovered a suitable weapon amongst this pile of debris . It was the seven or eight meter tall statue of Madonna and Child which used to be displayed in the first floor lobby!

Yelling out, he used the [Bull]'s monstrous strength to lift the statue that had somehow miraculously survived intact.

"Yaaaaaaaaah!"

This thing offered reach rivaling that of the massive magic blade. Swinging the statue like a laundry rod, Godou struck at Doni. Rather than expecting it to hit, Godou simply planned to hinder Doni's movements.

However, Doni did not dodge the attack.

With a loud crash, the statue of Madonna and Child struck him on the cheek. Godou was amazed.

In that very instant, runes floated all around Doni, glowing brightly.

To Godou's great surprise, the sensations transmitted through his hands felt as though he had struck a heavy block of iron. Smashing into Doni, the statue of Madonna and Child crumbled to pieces.

The King of Swords, surrounded by runic symbols, was completely unharmed. So this was a body of steel!?

"Alright alright, your engine must be getting all revved up!"

This time, Doni went for an overhead downwards chop.

A direct chop like the act of splitting firewood. Godou jumped backwards slightly to evade.

However, Doni's wave of offense did not end there. Easily lifting the lowered massive magic blade with his arm strength, he chopped down upon Godou's head again.

"Wah!"

Godou rolled awkwardly to the right and narrowly evaded the giant magic blade's pursuit.

Instead of hitting Godou, the gigantic magic blade embedded itself into the debris of the ruins with a crash. In that instant, calamity struck. An explosion happened, centered where the massive magic blade was buried, generating light, explosive wind and shockwaves.

"O Sword, shining bright, release flames!"

"What!?"

With brief spell words, Doni's sword made the ground explode.

Scorching heat and shockwaves were generated as if a buried landmine had exploded. It felt like a strengthened version of the explosion magic Bianchi used in Sardinia.

Nevertheless, it was unable to overcome a Campione's unreasonable resistance to magic.

Although engulfed by the white explosion, Godou simply suffered minor burns and scratches. However, he could not avoid being blown away by the explosive wave of heat and shock.

Not only could Doni slice things apart, but he was also able to imbue his attacks with this kind of additional effect--

Stunned, Godou was blown away by the force of the explosion.

Crash! His brief flight was halted by the impact of his back and the back of his head against a stone wall. His entire body was hurting, but thanks to this the distance between him and Doni was increased.

Godou sighed lightly as he searched his surroundings for weapons.

"At this distance, I definitely won't miss!"

Saying that, Godou picked up a piece of debris with one hand, roughly three times the size of a bowling ball. He threw it with the same technique as if he were picking off a fast runner on second base trying to steal third. Using the [Bull]'s monstrous strength, this attack would have the destructive power of a cannon ball.

Throwing it forward, the target was naturally Doni who was wielding the massive magic blade.

The stone flew at roughly 160km/h. Pitched at close range, it was more like a "fast stone" than a fastball.

Even the blond Campione should be unable to pierce this stone with ease.

But once again, Doni held his massive magic blade like a spear, simply shifting the gigantic blade pointing at Godou slightly to pierce the rubble.

Then, an explosion occurred--

From the rubble came a blinding white flash and wave of heat and explosive wind.

The explosion swallowed Doni. It was only natural for the perpetrator standing the closest to be engulfed when the sliced target exploded.

Nevertheless, surrounded by runic symbols, Doni remained unharmed.

A nonchalant expression on his face, he seemed completely unaffected by the explosive heat and force.

Godou threw his second pitch. Using both arms to pick up a piece of debris that was ten times larger than the previous one, he threw it with all his might. Furthermore, it flew just as fast as the previous one.

This time it struck on target. That piece of stone, most likely weighing over a hundred kilograms, violently smashed into Doni's body with speed and weight that even the strongest batters from America's Major League would not be able to hit back, becoming a vicious dead ball.

However, the stone noisily shattered into pieces. Doni did not even sway the slightest from the impact.

"Seriously, can't you be a little more human!?"

"I don't want to be criticized like that by you!"

Objecting, Doni made a thrust.

Within the tiniest of instants, the magic sword's blade already reached Godou.

--Using a normal sized sword, Doni had once exhibited magical slashing attacks that could not be felt coming. But because the giant magic blade was over ten times longer, Godou was also much further away from Doni.

Thanks to that distance, Godou had slightly more time to see him perform his sword strikes.

Presumably because of that, Godou found it much easier to evade his slashes compared to the time at Castello Sforzesco.

Once again, Godou jumped at the last second to dodge the sword blade.

The giant magic blade struck the wall behind Godou instead, severing it into two. At the same time, it produced the usual white explosion, sending Godou's body flying.

Once again, Godou landed on the debris laden ground, though his injuries were still minor.

Pushing himself up, Godou noticed the shattered Madonna and Child before his gaze. It was the statue he had used to strike Doni just now. Although the top half was smashed, the bottom was still intact.

Let me hinder him by throwing this thing at him -- just as the thought crossed his mind.

Godou saw a silhouette like a magical bird's. Wielding the giant magic blade, Doni leaped effortlessly.

Due to the destruction of the villa's ceiling, the moon was visible up in the sky. However, the figure of the silver blade and the magical swordsman completely blocked Godou's view of the moonlight.

It was a giant leap that almost instantly crossed the ten-odd meters that separated them.

--Godou recalled. This was a skill that Erica had also displayed in Sardinia. A movement technique that allowed a flesh-and-blood human being to obtain superhuman leaping ability and speed rivaling cars. Doni could also use it!

Doni's landing spot was the lower half of Madonna and Child that Godou was staring at.

Stepped on by the handsome man's boots, the statue crumbled again. It failed to support Doni's weight, as if his mass was on the order of tons -- !

"Hoho. Using this allows me to increase my mass as much as I want as dictated by inclination of spirit. But if I carelessly trample and wreck places, people get angry... By the way, right now I weigh something like a bulldozer?"

Doni declared boldly as runes glowed brightly all around him.

The mysterious symbols which conferred his durability of steel. Apparently that was not the only effect!

"Take a small car for example. I could step on it lightly if I wanted to, but then it wouldn't have much of an effect. It's quite annoying."

"...I see, becoming sturdy would only defend against an enemy's attack, but without the mass of iron, one would be sent flying no matter how sturdy--!"

Godou recalled what happened when he smashed the statue of Madonna and Child against Doni.

Not only was it hard, there was also a feeling like hitting something exceptionally heavy. If Godou was not infused with the [Bull]'s monstrous strength, his arms would have been injured from the force of reaction.

Struck by that, as well as other pieces of debris, Doni remained motionless.

Against the King of Swords, those types of heavy attacks were completely insignificant. Given Doni in his current state, he could probably engage giant Melqart and his clubs Yagrush and Ayamur in closequarters combat as equals.

He was different from the artfully sublime masters he had fought before. Depending on need, this man could transform himself into a heavyweight warrior who could pit his strength against gigantic gods. Crushing enemies by pure "strength" yet maintaining the movements of a lightweight body.

What a complete monster. Pure "strength" alone was not enough to compete against this guy.

Godou made his decision. Even though he was unsure how effective it would be, he had no way of knowing unless he tried.

Just now, he had confirmed that three incarnations were available. Abandoning the first, the [Bull], Godou switched to the second, the [Warrior].

The night before, together with Erica, he had forged the blade of spell words--

Not too long ago, Godou had discovered that this weapon was also effective against the authorities of Campiones. As a safety precaution, the act the two of them underwent by joining their hearts as one, became the trump card at this critical juncture.

Part 3

"Salvatore Doni. Silver-armed Nuadha, whom you defeated, was the king of the Tuatha Dé Danann worshiped by ancient Celts. This deity's majestic form, as befitted the king of the ancient world, survives to this day."

Light appeared in response to Godou's whispers.

Shining brilliantly golden, spheres of light. Roughly the size of baseballs.

"As the king of the Tuatha Dé Danann, Nuadha was also a war god who wielded the sword of victory. At the time, he was not yet silver-armed. However, while commanding his subordinates in the conquest of Ireland, he was injured in a battle against local deities, thereby losing his right arm."

In the blink of an eye, the number of light spheres shining brightly in Godou's surroundings increased in number.

Compared to the scattered few in the beginning, it multiplied to dozens and then to over a hundred.

"Due to this injury, Nuadha was forced to give up his position as king. Hence, the god of physicians forged a new arm of silver for the one-armed former king. Nevertheless, the silver-armed god Nuadha did not regain his throne at this point. He was only restored to power after he was perfectly restored with an arm of flesh and blood."

Every time spell words were composed, new spheres of light were born, increasing the brilliance illuminating the surroundings.

This brightness was Godou's weapon as the [Warrior] -- the [Sword] of spell words.

"The king must be a warrior. Powerful, formidable, and physically perfect. This was a common tradition in the ancient world. So long as Nuadha remained the 'one-armed god,' he was ineligible to be restored to power!"

The numerous lights from the [Sword] were shining radiantly like the brilliant multitude of stars in the Milky Way.

Seeing these shining lights, Doni smiled.

"Hohoho... I know."

Instead of his usual cheerful and foolish grin, this was a smile filled with the joy of battle as befitted the prodigious talent of the incomparable King of Swords.

"This is a [Sword] eh? A sword not forged and polished from iron but carved and formed out of spell words. A sword of

wizardry. Godou, you too are a sword-wielding god-slayer! How interesting!"

Bearing the magic blade, Doni yelled loudly.

"Facing me who is served by a sword of steel, you oppose me with a sword constructed from spell words... Salvatore Doni and Kusanagi Godou's styles share no commonality at all. Hoho, but that's who we are, after all!"

Doni's eyes were flashing with a strange sense of kinship and competitive spirit.

"Yes. Conflicts between us Campiones are always undertaken as battles of obstinate wills, to prove whose manner of doing things is superior! You seem to have finally understood that promise. I am so happy!"

Doni made a thrust with the giant magic blade again.

However, Godou no longer dodged. Instead, he chanted spell words.

"Glorious victory in my hands, evildoers shall never triumph over me!"

Godou caused the dozens of flashing [Swords] around him to accelerate.

Doni's makeshift giant magic blade crashed towards them as they flew in the air like shooting stars.

Flash, flash, flash, flash -- flashing nonstop, the [Sword]'s lights crossed paths with the extra large silver magic blade for an instant.

In less than a tenth of second before the magic blade was going to slice Godou apart...

The giant magic blade which should have cleanly split Godou apart straight down from his head, shattered noisily as if it were made of glass.

Carrying the ability to sever silver-armed Nuadha, the [Sword] destroyed the giant magic blade.

However, Salvatore Doni's right arm remained in its silver state. His hand still held the base of the giant magic blade, the completely ordinary sword.

Doni's authority, the [Ripping Arm of Silver], was still intact.

"Not completely severed eh..."

"I think you've already done superbly. Excluding the gods, I don't think there's more than four people who could actually fight back against my sword strikes."

Nuadha's authority was deeply rooted in the very being of Salvatore Doni's soul.

Realizing that this core component had not been severed, he offered praise to Godou along the lines of "ranking amongst one of four warriors in the world."

But you just watch, I'm going to sever it next -- As Godou intended to chant spell words again.

"How befitting of a [Sword] of spell words. Well, isn't it great to have something so convenient? But now that I understand what kind of weapon it is, I will commit myself accordingly."

As Doni smiled, the protective runes surrounding him vanished .

"I... I forbid the existence of things I cannot cut."

The glow of the silver arm increased. The same glow was also added to the sword held in Doni's hand.

"Godou, your [Sword] seems to be a weapon meant for slicing apart my 'magic sword.' But I hereby swear, I shall sever your [Sword] in turn. Putting my full strength on the line!"

The Campione of Swords' declaration of intent was also composed of spell words.

Salvatore Doni went as far as to assert he would slice apart Verethragna's [Sword] that stood as Nuadha's natural predator, getting all fired up with magical power.

For this purpose, he deactivated the [Man of Steel].

Pouring forth all the magical power he could muster into the " magic sword."

Godou received quite a fright, probably due to the [Warrior] incarnation. Knowing his enemy's origins with deep understanding, it felt like these traits of the [Warrior] allowed him to read his enemy's intentions.

This ability was warning him, that Doni's oath could possibly -- could actually be realized.

Doni's authority specialized in "slicing attacks." As a result of this simplicity, the silver "magic sword" was infused with divine might allowing it to cut through even its own natural predator!

"So... I will sever it before you succeed!"

Just as Godou steeled his determination, Doni approached suddenly.

But rather than shortening the distance instantly, he was walking at a casual pace. In fact, he was taking carefree steps as if visiting the home of a friend or a relative. From the way he walked , one would not have been able to tell a duel was in progress.

Nevertheless, by the time Godou noticed, Doni had already " swiftly" appeared before him. He was within the range at which he could capture Godou with his sword!

Faster than the eye could follow, Godou was within striking distance of Doni's sword by the time he realized.

Godou had witnessed at Castello Sforzesco the same inscrutable movement technique that made Doni resemble a heavenly being riding upon clouds.

"Defeating thousands with the strength of hundreds, vanquishing tens of thousands with the attack of thousands!"

Terrified by Doni's godly technique, Godou chanted spell words once more.

He instantly summoned a hundred [Swords] to form a protective shield before him, while Doni struck at the densely gathered golden lights resembling a galaxy, his sword moving as if propelled by burning flames.

At that very moment, [Sword] and "magic sword" clashed openly.

Blocked by the golden light, the silver magic sword's motion halted. Clearly only 50cm away from reaching Godou's body, it could not advance any further.

The silver-white light enveloping the sword, flickered intensely like the flames of a dying candle.

This was the result of the golden stars blocking the sword's path , which still carried the effect of sealing the silver-armed authority. Doni's "magic sword" and the power to "slice through all existence " were gradually being chipped away and progressively weakening.

However, the one whose face was distorted by anxiety was Godou.

And the one grinning nonchalantly was Doni instead.

"I've heard from those people at Palermo who observed your fight against Melqart. You seem to have usurped from Verethragna the ability to sever a 'divinity' itself. Using this ability really would allow you to fight to great effect against all sorts of deities."

Doni pushed his magic sword of light further slightly.

1cm, followed by another 1cm. The sword's blade gradually approached Godou.

"In any case, it could target only a specific portion of the authorities held by a deity, right? Well, that's not enough to overwhelm the enemy like some kind of miraculous panacea -- that was my conclusion as soon as I heard the report. It's just as I thought!"

Completely correct, it was exactly as Doni described. Godou nodded in acknowledgement.

The golden [Sword] originally could sever the silver sword with ease. However, an excessively simple power like "slicing through all existence" combined with the fact that Doni poured forth his entire power to strengthen it, that sort of over optimistic personality was a recipe for disaster.

It made what should have been severable inseverable. Furthermore, Doni's "magic sword" was slowly pressing forward even as it weakened.

Godou glared intensely at Salvatore Doni.

This handsome man was undoubtedly a great idiot. And very obviously, he had many flaws. Nevertheless, he displayed unusual cunning where it mattered. Also, he had mastered many ultimate techniques.

Erica called this man a genius of the sword.

But having fought him in actual combat, Godou now realized that the description was completely insufficient.

Being inexperienced, Godou could not tell or imagine how much hardship Doni had endured throughout his training. Nevertheless, he could believe it was the result of efforts accumulated day after day, immersed in a domain of crazed obsession--

Obsessively ignoring sleep and food, avoiding all mundane tasks, focusing entirely on honing a single art.

No everyday life, no ordinary happiness. Only thoughts focused on upgrading one's skill, repeating every day by trial and error without end.

It could only be something like that. Like playing an RPG where the accumulation of experience points did not rely on artistry.

Never indulging oneself, never compromising, always pushing one's body and mind to the limits of exhaustion, striving towards " that particular direction" with foolish obsession.

Ultimately, Doni achieved a level that entitled him to be called a "sword demon" or a "sword god."

"...Against this kind of opponent, victory cannot be seized without sufficient determination--"

Godou secretly grumbled to himself.

The protective shield formed by the golden [Sword] barely managed to block Doni's sword. However, only 20cm remained before the blade would reach Godou's body.

Godou was not confident if he could sever Doni's "magic sword " before that.

Nevertheless, he still had an ace up his sleeve -- Entirely the result of being in the form of the [Warrior], he could inexplicably experience his enemy's greatness. As much as he wished to deny it, he felt compelled to offer utmost praise to his opponent.

Precisely because of that, Godou very naturally resolved himself to use his trump card.

"In that case, I'll show you my spirit and determination!"

Godou recalled all the [Swords] which were not being used as part of the protective shield.

Numerous golden spheres of light were attracted to Godou's body, gathering together, shining with spectacular brilliance.

As if enveloped by a galaxy of stars, Godou immediately took action. At the same time, this gave Salvatore Doni an opening to exploit.

"What!?"

Godou dispelled the protective shield standing between him and Doni.

Due to the barrier's disappearance, the sword enveloped in silver-white light headed straight towards Godou. This resulted in a diagonal slash from the left lower flank across to the right shoulder.

Godou's body, enveloped in golden light, was viciously sliced.

A great volume of blood gushed out. It was as if a "/" symbol had been carved on his upper torso.

This was the first time Godou experienced such an injury. Not only his skin and muscle, but even all the bones and internal organs between his left flank and right shoulder were sliced through.

Rather than pain, the sensation was more accurately described as burning.

Godou's body swayed and he nearly fell on his knees. He was only able to endure thanks to a Campione's resilient body and an

athlete's unrelenting spirit. Salvatore Doni was truly terrifying. Without using anything more than a sword of ordinary sharpness, he had sliced through bones that were harder than iron.

Furthermore, he had not relied on his authority--

"Ha, hahahaha, I see I see. You actually had this up your sleeve. "

On the other hand, Doni was laughing so hard his shoulders were shaking.

His silver-white arm had returned to flesh. Covered with blood, the sword had also lost its silver glow.

"I get it now. Given that I was slicing at your body, if you preemptively positioned your [Sword] there, it wouldn't be difficult to intercept my 'magic sword.' However, you had to resolve yourself to be sliced!"

As he laughed, his eyes stared at Godou with exceptional passion.

Just as Doni described, the trump card Kusanagi Godou employed was his own "body." Using his body to bait the "magic sword," the price he paid was the suffering of a vicious slash.

Only by neutralizing Nuadha's authority at the very last moment, Godou escaped bifurcation.

Although the price he paid was extremely heavy, his plan went off smoothly as intended...

Most likely, the [Sword] could only seal Nuadha's authority temporarily. That was what he speculated from the feeling. However, it should be more than ample for the duration of the duel.

"This is really great! For you to come up with this creative idea in a situation like this, and have the decisiveness to put it into action. Godou, you're really foolish enough for an idiot!"

"I-I don't want to be called an idiot by an idiot!"

"Hey hey, I was praising you there."

While Godou protested as he panted from the intense pain, Doni spoke with an air of nonchalance.

"Originally I looked forward to a duel simply because you are a Campione. But now, I understand things differently. Kusanagi Godou -- you are a man I approve as worthy to be my 'friend.' I clearly realize that now."

Casually stated by the young man possessing the divine arm and a sword demon's martial arts.

"F-Friend...?"

"Ah yes. Not simply familiar opponents. We will probably cross swords a good many times in the future and develop a relationship where we communicate through exchanges of the fist.

Sometimes fighting each other, sometimes fighting as comrades, but ultimately we will seek each other out for a decisive duel -- that's what I see for our future."

"That... That's not what friends do. That's more like rivals or competitors!"

In response to Godou's objections voiced through pain endurance, Doni nodded with a nonchalant expression.

"Indeed. Written 'mortal enemy' but pronounced 'friend.' Isn't that a wonderful relationship?"

"How is that wonderful in any way?!"

Why did he have to retort so desperately?

Godou muttered as he activated the [Camel] incarnation. Now that his friend -- no, enemy had lost Nuadha's arm, the [Warrior] was no longer needed.

Due to the severe injury he had just suffered, it became usable.

As the numerous golden spheres of light vanished, replacing them was the infusion of ferocious beast-like combat ability into his body.

Amongst Verethragna's abilities, this was probably the strongest incarnation in terms of close-quarters combat. This incarnation could very well back Doni into a corner. Godou realized the battle had finally reached the endgame.

Part 4

Last night, having completed the [Sword] for slicing Nuadha.

Erica Blandelli suddenly changed her attitude towards Kusanagi Godou. Since she had already expressed her love in no uncertain terms, plus the fact that the two of them had already kissed passionately, there was no point in behaving conservatively anymore.

Her first change was the sense of distance she kept with Godou.

She was now always within arm's reach, or even so close that she could kiss him any time simply by drawing her face nearer.

This was the sort of extremely close distance she maintained.

As a result, she discovered how amusing and cute it was to see Godou clearly losing his composure.

Struck with mischievous thoughts, she would caress Godou for no apparent reason, sometimes kissing him lightly on his lips or cheeks all of a sudden.

"Hey Godou... We really should sleep in the same room tonight, right?"

Late at night, that was what she whispered softly into Godou's ear.

Desperately objecting to her proposal, Godou locked himself in another room.

--In terms of lacking in dating experience, Erica and Godou were actually about equal.

However, compared to Erica who had plenty of opportunities to observe open displays of affectionate couples in public, Godou had always maintained an attitude of avoidance.

This exemplified their differences in culture and personality.

Determined to accommodate their differences and enjoy her relationship with him, Erica brought along the youth she loved when she went out that morning.

Walking on foot for about twenty minutes, they came to a lakeside cafe.

Whether during the walk or inside the cafe, Erica naturally stuck to Godou virtually all the time.

Up until yesterday, bystanders would probably conclude they were simply "very close friends." But now, having witnessed their behavior this morning, most people would probably speculate they were "a loving couple."

Erica happily accepted such views.

On the other hand, Godou was bored senseless trying to shrink himself from sight.

Finally, Erica returned to her usual attitude. It was after they had finished their espresso and croissant breakfast at a waterfront table. Erica had casually mentioned the duel, thus bringing up the most important subject of the day.

"Starting from just now, I don't know why, but I keep thinking about this idea."

Godou finally recovered some life in his eyes.

However, it also felt embarrassing to gaze into Erica's eyes, so he immediately looked away whenever their gazes met. Hence, his view had settled somewhere over on the lake.

"The designated battleground for the duel, could also be chosen there."

"There... Godou, you don't mean that, do you? Why?"

Her beloved youth's gaze was focused on a certain object ahead.

Noticing the object bobbing slowly on the surface of the clear lakewater, Erica questioned.

"Look, the villa that was once a monastery, you said it was fine to destroy it, right? But if we do it here instead, I was thinking if we could sink that bastard Doni to the bottom of the lake. --Wait a minute, it's probably not gonna work. I don't think sending that idiot into the water is enough to end the fight."

Godou muttered repeatedly with uncertainty.

"Actually, it's probably to your disadvantage if the fight ends up in the water, Godou. Sir Salvatore can apparently survive thousands of meters deep in the ocean."

Normally suppressed by common sense, Godou's tendency towards drastic action seemed to be subtly expressing itself.

It must be due to the approaching duel. Observing with great amusement, Erica spoke:

"Sir Salvatore's authority of invulnerability is not limited to making his body durable. Reportedly, there was one time when he was fighting a sea god somewhere, the ship that carried him there was sunk into the Puerto Rico Trench. But a week later, he returned safe and sound. A legend that sounds like some kind of joke."

"Is that guy some kind of deepwater creature..."

"It would not be surprising if he rivals a tardigrade's ability to survive."

As a side note, the tardigrade was a microorganism roughly a millimeter in body length. It was the kind of resilient existence that could enter a state of suspended animation, allowing it to survive extreme environments such as high temperatures, low temperatures and vacuums.[21]

"Godou, if you really have that intention, I could help you obtain that thing to ride. Yes, there's the spell I mentioned yesterday. At my current level, even moving that size of metal is no problem at all."

"I-Idiot. It was just a thought. Don't treat it seriously."

The suggestion was tentatively rejected by Godou.

Very likely, this idea was proposed with roughly 52% seriousness -- although that was what Erica suspected, she did not voice it out. This was a knight's compassion.

--In any case, the night of the duel finally arrived.

Erica Blandelli did not participate. Like the battle against Melqart, she waited on standby in case of changes in the situation. She kept a fair distance away from the two Devil Kings.

Also, regarding Erica's participation:

"Since this is clearly meant to be a one on one duel, wouldn't this be unfair?"

"No problem. When Godou summoned the [Boar], didn't Melqart call forth his servants? Having divine beasts or familiars to assist in fights is actually fundamental to the battles of your ilk."

Despite Godou's objections, she replied nonchalantly.

And now, under Erica's careful watch, Godou had sealed the " magic sword" by using his own body as bait.

Though heavily injured, he was now able to use the [Camel] to face off against the Campione of Swords.

"Now, let's start concluding things officially."

As Doni muttered, the runes of [Steel] spread all around him.

On the other hand, Godou seemed to be frowning from the pain of the sword injury.

However, the bleeding had already stopped. Apparently, his healing powers were even stronger than usual. This was probably one of the abilities of the [Camel], in addition to conferring beast-like combat ability and exceptional kicking power. His body also seemed lighter and more agile.

Using speed that no track athlete could hope to match, Godou suddenly broke into a run.

Nevertheless, Salvatore Doni pursued with a knight's [Leap] magic. This was the physical technique known as qinggong to Chinese martial artists whose use conferred exceptional running and jumping ability.

Wherever Doni ran, deep footprints were left behind conspicuously on the ground.

It was reminiscent of the tracks left behind by the treads of heavy machinery. Just as Doni described, his weight must have multiplied to a frightening degree.

However, Doni continued to run with his usual speed and posture.

"Sir Salvatore's [Man of Steel]... Turns out to be even more ridiculous than imagined."

Murmuring to herself, Erica also began to run.

She too, was capable of [Leap] magic so there was no worry she would be left behind. In mere minutes, Godou raced down the mountain path that had taken him thirty minutes to climb yesterday. Doni took slightly longer followed by Erica who had been hiding.

Godou's destination was the pier on the lakeside.

This was where many private yachts were moored. Lake Garda, as Italy's largest lake, was a place that allowed the enjoyment of marine leisure activities.

Godou ran there with the blond Campione in pursuit.

His target was very likely -- Erica observed the direction he was running towards.

She could tell immediately. Before her eyes were the ships used for touring Lake Garda. Since it was night time, all these ships were moored in preparation for setting sail the next day.

"I was really so surprised to hear you describing yourself as a pacifist and someone with common sense. Clearly whenever you come across something advantageous in battle, you almost never hesitate to make use of it."

Surprisingly, he went beyond a simple lack of scruples. Erica murmured to herself.

"Probably, you'd use anything unscrupulously so long as it wasn't overtly cowardly or villainous. And with great momentary decisiveness!"

Erica could imagine what Godou was about to do.

Born sharp and intelligent, and having spent brief but intense days with the youth, she naturally figured out what he almost suggested.

She saw Godou jump with great agility, leaping onto the deck of the tour ship.

Chasing after him, Doni also jumped onto the ship. The instant he landed, the ship rocked violently, presumably due to the blond handsome man's excessive weight.

Prepared for the situation, Erica chanted spell words as she came before the ship.

"In my distress I called upon the Lord, and cried unto my God: he heard my voice out of his temple, and my cry came before him, even into his ears. Then the earth shook and trembled; the foundations also of the hills moved and were shaken... Because he was wroth!"[22]

Choosing a ship as the stage for the duel and having the [Boar] destroy it. That was the plan suggested earlier in the morning.

However, even if they did that, Salvatore Doni would probably survive miraculously. Regardless, the [Boar] was temporarily unusable for now. In that case, Godou's goal should not be that.

Most likely, he intended to take advantage of his enemy's " invulnerability"...!

Starting from the ruins of the monastery, a long distance run took place for six minutes or so.

Switching locations to the deck of a tour ship, the final round of the battle began. A diagonal straight sword cut across his upper torso, Godou faced off against Doni.

"Finally the foot race has ended... This can't be your hobby. I was beginning to think you were trying to use some kind of long range weapon."

Bearing a sword and the runes of [Steel], Doni smiled fearlessly. Compared to before, his current expression displayed less

foolishness and more acuity. Godou knew that he looked more like a proper lady-killer when his face was like that.

His beautiful voice whispering softly, expressed complete manliness despite the sweetness in tone.

"If I could still use the silver arm, I'd simply slice the ground to pieces to bury you."

"Gee thanks, I'm really relieved that you can't do something so lacking in common sense."

Retorting with sarcasm, Godou was currently using the [Camel] incarnation.

The straight slashing wound was not too painful but only felt a little hot. This was probably the [Camel]'s effect.

"Fufufu. Ignoring your own issues, that's really quite a flaw of yours."

Doni "swiftly" approached as he remarked rudely.

At the same time, he sliced with his sword like a flame haze. Even without Nuadha's authority, Salvatore Doni was still a person who could use the magic sword on some level.

The [Camel]'s combat sense managed to see through that magical swordsmanship.

As Godou dodged by the slimmest of margins, Doni watched with a nonchalant expression.

"This time, you're using an ability that enables you to engage me in close-quarter combat. Your authority appears to allow you to switch between warlord Verethragna's ten incarnations."

"You are right."

"I knew it. Given that the ten incarnations have the quality of switching, it feels like there should be all sorts of usage conditions. Once you master your authority, things will be really interesting."

Doni dangled his sword vertically by his side, resuming his usual stance.

"However, all that would be meaningless if you were to fall here!"

As soon as he finished his merciless declaration, he slashed. A horizontal slash!

Godou focused his vision to watch Doni's sword clearly.

Comparing Erica's sword swings with Doni's, Godou finally understood that the latter's trajectories were far more compact.

Using shorter, smaller trajectories, he was able to swing his sword much faster!

Furthermore, his swings carried greater impact, delivering intense power with his sword!

All these factors combined to produce those "flame haze"-like sword strikes that were difficult to evade. Very likely, Doni was capable of slicing at maximum force even when limited to short distances of 30cm. Truly, his was a magic sword transcending common logic.

"And that's why this guy is a master!"

Expressing admiration and annoyance simultaneously, Godou did not retreat from this attack.

A sure-kill horizontal slice to the torso. Impossible to evade. There were no avenues for retreat backwards or to the side. This was what the [Camel]'s instincts sensed. The only way to survive was -- forward!

Godou's body moved on its own. Stepping ahead of where Doni's swing was heading, he jumped lightly, sending a sudden knee towards the face of the Campione who possessed the weight and hardness of steel.

Doni blocked Godou's knee with his left palm.

The impact felt like kicking an iron plate, but Godou's kneecap did not fracture. After all, the [Camel]'s kicks had the power to shatter concrete and break iron plates.

Although Doni's left palm was completely unharmed, that did not matter.

Thanks to running forward, as long as Godou avoided the sword's blade, as long as it was only Doni's right arm that struck him, his body could still endure.

"Eh."

Grunting, Doni stepped on Godou's instep.

It felt like a heavy block of iron had been dropped on it. While Godou was distracted by the pain from his left foot...

Doni used his unarmed left hand to push Godou's chest. This seemed like a light shove, but was actually a terrifying palm strike.

With a great thud, Godou felt like the core of his body was struck by a crushing impact, sending him toppling backwards. The sensation was like being rolled over by a fully accelerated dump truck.

To think the [Man of Steel]'s weight could be used to attack in this manner!

Furthermore, while performing these actions, Doni turned the sword in his right hand at the same time. He was aiming for a straight thrust for piercing Godou's throat.

In order to evade, Godou arched himself and leaned backwards.

As Doni's sword missed, Godou aimed a kick at his right fist which held the sword. However, the sturdy and heavy arm did not even budge from the impact.

"Still not giving up, Godou? But how much further can you endure?"

Doni swung his sword at Godou's horizontal posture, slicing at his abdomen.

This attack caused Godou to roll on the ground to evade. Though his posture was most unbecoming, there was no other choice given the circumstances. In order to survive, Godou took desperate measures.

His enemy was an expert in close-quarter combat, and a super heavyweight as well.

Furthermore, Godou's left foot was now injured by the stomping, rendering his agility useless. Standing up, Godou found the night breeze blowing across his face rather chilly.

"No, there's no need to endure any further. I'm so relieved."

Cornered to this extent, indeed there was no point in seeking victory through close-quarter combat.

However, Godou began to smile. He could feel his lips twisting grotesquely. Because he knew the opportunity for counterattacking had finally arrived, his fighting spirit was roused intensely.

"Something I possess, but you don't, has given me a final chance . If this doesn't work, then I have no hope of winning -- so I will give it a try!"

"Hoho. What naive words."

Godou conversed with Doni as he thanked Erica in his heart.

Even though he did not have the leisure to confer with her, his " partner" had already read his intentions perfectly.

While the two god-slayers were fighting on the deck, the ship had started moving at some point in time.

Using the "magic for making metal move" that she mentioned yesterday and this morning, Erica made the ship set sail.

The night breeze blowing across the lake was extremely cold.

Having left the shore, the ferry had sailed quite far into the lake.

The water in this area should be deep enough. Since Lake Garda was Italy's deepest lake, it should be more than sufficient. Godou spoke up:

"Just as you described, my abilities have many strict usage conditions. Amongst them all, this one is also quite troublesome to fulfill. But with you as the target, this posed no problem from the start."

Earlier, Godou had confirmed three incarnations available for use. Now was the time to unleash the third one.

"By troublesome, you mean?"

"It is only permitted to be used against a great sinner who has caused hardship and suffering to the people... You, how much trouble have you brought on others? Since my most powerful move was available from the very start, I decided to trick you by using it last."

"I just go a little far with my pranks sometimes. If you label me as a great sinner, wouldn't you deserve the same title based on what happened tonight?"

"I don't want to hear that from you!"

This was a frivolous exchange, lacking in solemnity that befitted a duel between Devil Kings.

However, the preparations were all complete. From the tour ship's deck, Godou glanced into the distance and saw specks of starlight in the eastern sky.

"For victory, hasten forth before me... O Immortal Sun, I beseech thee to grant radiance to the stallion!"

As Godou yelled out the spell words, the eastern sky was illuminated by the rosy colors of sunrise.

This untimely light of dawn pierced the veil of night. Furthermore, the eastern sun fragmented to form a descending spear of flame at this instant.

This was the arrival of Verethragna's third incarnation, the [White Stallion].

"Guh -- !"

Even Salvatore Doni was unable to evade the downpour of flames.

Engulfed by white light, he was scorched by the flames of judgment.

If he opened fire at full blast like the time at Sicily, even Godou himself would get caught up in the flames. Godou desperately used his thoughts to focus the flames and heat as much as possible. His prayers answered, the white conflagration formed a pillar of fire centered on Doni with a radius of a few meters.

Although a massive hole was bored through the ship, it still managed to continue sailing.

At this very moment, Doni could be heard yelling.

"You really dared to do it. But don't think you can get past my invulnerability!"

Standing in the middle of the white pillar of fire, Doni smiled courageously. In this extreme predicament, the "warrior amongst warriors" was literally on fire, displaying greater ferocity the hotter his temperature.

"Even if the body is crushed and scattered, the sword never dies ! The broken blade shall be melted down in the furnace, forged once more to be reborn as a new sword. This level of flames cannot destroy me!"

These were spell words for invoking the [Man of Steel] for maximum protection.

The runes surrounding Doni increased to several hundred, glowing with red light. Standing in the center of the fire, the blond Campione unbelievably survived.

His clothes were burning away in the super high temperature flames while his sword gradually melted into a viscous paste.

That muscular body, as tight as a whip, was scorched red in color -- or rather, it became red-hot like metal heated to high temperature. Nevertheless, he remained completely unharmed!

At the same time, the [White Stallion]'s flames began to burn the ship's body, melting it.

"Friend, I will endure this scorching right before your eyes! After that, let's have an unrestrained final round!"

"Seriously, by this stage, this is the final round!"

Godou forced his heavily wounded body to move, intending to jump into the lake.

He knew the ship's body was reaching its limits. Rather than getting burnt alive, he would rather take his chances by taking a night swim with his injured body.

Doni extended a scorched red-hot hand towards Godou.

"Come on man, don't say something so heartless. Our battle is only starting now!"

"Like I said, it's impossible! Unless you can float in water with that mass of yours!"

"Eh?"

The ship finally melted and sank, sending both Devil Kings into Lake Garda.

However, their fates stood in stark contrast.

Kusanagi Godou barely managed to tread water and stay afloat.

On the other hand, his body of [Steel] strengthened to the max, Salvatore Doni sank to the bottom like an anchor made of steel.

In addition, the [White Stallion]'s rays of the sun continued firing from the eastern sky, as if trying to incinerate Doni even as he sank. Not this again, thought Godou to himself.

Lakewater boiled and evaporated from the high temperature.

Steaming up everywhere, the lakewater became scalding like boiling water.

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah..."

Salvatore Doni's voice and figure disappeared into the depths of the lake.

Nevertheless, the [White Stallion] descending from the eastern sky continued, attempting to burn its sunken target to the very end . The blue lakewater continued to heat up, but Doni survived nonetheless.

After one or two minutes, Erica arrived to the rescue on a rowing boat.

Saved from the water, Godou could still watch the laser beam persist for quite a while longer.

As soon as the light and flames finally vanished, Godou spoke up quietly on the boat.

"...I was thinking just maybe, did that guy die?"

"...Then rather than 'just maybe,' you should be saying 'sure enough.' However."

Erica displayed a complicated expression that included worry and admiration.

"I don't believe for one second that Sir Salvatore would die as easily as that. I keep getting the feeling he would exclaim 'I almost thought I was a goner!" and suddenly surface from the water any time."

Godou completely agreed on this point.

Epilogue

Taking a rowing boat, Erica rescued Godou from the lake.

However, he fainted soon after they reached the shore. Having been cut by Doni's sword and suffering further injuries, he was on the verge of death.

Thanks to the [Camel] incarnation, his ability to endure hits also seemed to be strengthened.

Hence, once the incarnation was gone, Godou was at his limits. Just before losing consciousness, Godou naturally used the [Ram] incarnation in preparation for super recovery. Then the next morning arrived.

At the log house villa, Godou regained consciousness under Erica's care.

Then he found himself dying of hunger. Consequently, he went outside accompanied by the blonde beauty, going to the lakeside cafe to fill his stomach--

"Yo, you guys are here too? What a strange coincidence."

Inside the cafe, they met Salvatore Doni, bright red as if sunburnt.

Clearly it was still spring but his skin was fiery red. Erica almost fell down with surprise for an instant. Shrugging her shoulders, she said:

"It's been a day -- or rather, a night, Sir Salvatore. You have returned safely."

"Yes. I almost thought I was a goner, but I survived after all. Ah, your name is Erica Blandelli, right?"

"...Yes. May I ask how you came to remember my name?"

"Because you are my beloved Godou's attendant. I still remember."

Doni smiled nonchalantly as Erica displayed great surprise. The acuity and valor he exhibited at the endgame of the duel last night had all vanished.

Godou frowned as he interrupted the exchange between a king and a knight.

"No, we didn't think you'd die like that either. But how did you survive? Shouldn't there be limits to absurdity!?"

"Hohoho, listen well. I was thinking it might get dangerous if I continue to be scorched like that. So I actually entered a state of suspended animation to avert the brunt of the flames. After that, I used my steel body to run, climb and jump across the bottom of the lake, finally reaching land!"

"A state of suspended animation, are you really a tardigrade!?"

Discovering his opponent's surprising mode of life, Godou could feel a headache coming.

"Indeed, a body of steel cannot float on water, but there's no risk of suffocation or hypothermia either. The only troublesome thing is, once I enter a state of suspended animation, this temporary death persists for a while. Which is how I spent a night at the bottom of the lake. I finally managed to wake up this morning."

Smiling cheerfully, Doni recounted his ludicrous survival story.

Wait a minute, since Godou also possessed similar survival abilities, he could not comment as if it did not apply to himself as well.

"After all, even someone like me would be tired as hell. I'm hungry and covered with wounds. Indeed, I don't have the strength to fight you right now. Let's call our duel yesterday a draw?"

"I don't mind at all... But I don't see any injuries on you?"

Other than sunburnt in appearance, Doni's body looked completely the same as before.

Godou questioned with an expression of suspicion.

"Well, look here. I'm afraid my skin might become rough or have skin cancer or something, so I never neglect my UV care. But to think I'd get scorched to this degree... Well done, Godou."

"Stop saying that with such a serious expression!"

Doni's face in a tense expression, Godou naturally took a seat opposite him at the same table.

An almost subconscious act. Erica also sat down beside him.

After ten-odd minutes, they began to eat the food that arrived.

Breakfast in Italy was usually a simple affair. A foundation of croissants and bread with jam combined with espresso or cappuccino coffee.

However, this morning was an exception.

There was cream cheese made from goat's milk blended with black pepper, as well as a large plate of pasta.

Godou and Doni wolfed down all this food as if they had not eaten for days. Also, Erica ordered a sweet cream croissant for herself.

"Hey you, don't take so much. Shouldn't you think about leaving some for others!?"

"Hey hey Godou, a ceasefire on the dinner table does not exist. This should be universal. Survival of the fittest is the biggest rule here!"

"Damn it, in that case, I have my own methods!"

Wielding a fork on their right and holding a plate in their left, Godou and Doni competed over the abundant plate of pasta. With complete seriousness, they started a contest to see who could eat faster and more.

Seeing them act in such a manner, Erica exclaimed emphatically :

"What should I say... You've become reliable in very short time, Godou. Standing up to Sir Salvatore and not losing in any way. Is this a Devil King's disposition...?"

"Don't compare me with this idiot!"

"Please don't say something so cold. After all, aren't we similar in many ways?"

"In no way are we similar!"

This scene concluded the final act of the duel drama between Kusanagi Godou and Salvatore Doni.

After separating from Doni who had called for a ride from his subordinates, Godou and Erica decided to return to the villa.

The two of them walked along the beautiful lakeshore.

It was a warm morning in spring. The blue sky was clear and sunny while the blowing breeze felt leisurely and comfortable.

Happiest of all, he had a thoughtful and understanding "partner " by his side.

Godou felt a sense of fulfillment in his heart that he had never experienced before.

Furthermore, he felt as though no reasons were needed.

Erica must have been thinking the same thing -- glancing at her as she walked beside him, Godou witnessed the beautiful smile of the most gorgeous girl he knew.

"Although many things need to be said, let's start with ' Congratulations' okay?"

Saying that, Erica leaned over matter-of-factly.

With her arms wrapped around Godou's right arm, they looked completely like a pair of lovers. Erica proceeded to bring her lips near Godou's blushing cheeks and gave him a light kiss.

"E-Enough. I don't think this is very appropriate. We should get along as friends in a more wholesome manner!"

If things really continued this way, he felt like he would be swept along naturally by the flow.

However, Godou desperately appealed as much as possible to his reason. Once their relationship became too intimate, there would be no way out.

In this respect, perhaps this was the tragedy of a man whose age equaled the number of years without a girlfriend.

"Hohoho, you're really cute when you're shy. However, please take a good look around. There's no one here who would mind our behavior. We can openly express and affirm our love for each other, you know?"

It was just as Erica stated.

The occasional passerby was completely unconcerned with their horseplay. For a passionate Latin country, this level of bodily contact was considered only natural instead.

Kusanagi Godou was the only one in doubt, hesitating, faltering .

He could not think of a single reason why he could not take the next step forward. This was the beginning of a mystery that troubled Godou until Lucretia pointed things out frankly.

"In any case, the incident has ended. Erica, you should go back and apologize to your uncle. Say sorry for the trouble you've caused. I'm sure he'll forgive you, Erica."

Godou struggled to calm his heart and spoke out about what he worried the most.

For his sake, she had left her association and bid farewell to her only blood relative. He could not return to Japan without resolving this matter. Luckily there were still a few days remaining in his Golden Week vacation...

In order to be responsible for her to the end, Godou spoke with utmost sincerity.

"Ah, that's over already. Completely resolved."

Erica answered in an awfully frank manner.

"Just now when Godou and Sir Salvatore were indulging your gluttony, I already called Uncle in Milan and reported to him the conclusion of the incident and my contributions in the affair."

Come to think of it, Erica did leave her seat at the breakfast table for a brief while.

Godou had speculated that she was frightened by Doni and his appetite, but that was not the case.

"1) Kusanagi Godou is a man with the potential to fight Sir Salvatore to a draw.

2) He and Erica Blandelli have established a personal relationship of lovers.

3) If I can make good use of my position, then provided that the [Copper Black Cross] does not come under Kusanagi Godou's command, it is not difficult to obtain his protection.

4) Due to these achievements, I am allowed to return to the association, and he will even bestow upon me the premier knight's title of the [Diavolo Rosso] -- basically, that's what Uncle said."

"S-So what's up over on that side?"

"A complete understanding has been reached. My return, Erica Blandelli's, has been approved. Thank you, Godou, this is all thanks to you."

Erica smiled. This was a devil's smile of which he unwittingly caught sight.

A smile more gorgeous than anyone else's. A lioness' smile. A lady's smile. An innocent maiden's smile. Gaining amusement from other people's misfortune, this face like a devil's suited her quite well along with her various expressions.

Godou recognized this point once again.

"Even though we ran into all sorts of troubles, big and small, and you completely used me, I don't really mind at all. B-But what is with that lovers relationship!?"

Give and take, aligned interests.

Due to his association with many strange relatives and acquaintances (foremost being his grandfather and mother), Godou was very open and tolerant of such things.

However, there was only one fact he could not ignore.

"W-Won't it have a bad effect? What should I say, it's bad for respectability."

"That's no problem. It's just slightly unwholesome on first glance. Normally, calling yourself 'lovers♪' feels kind of salacious, but it also sounds more convincing to the listener."

"But it's not the truth at all."

"Well, would you simply call it a relationship of mutually passionate kissing?"

"Guh."

"Hoho. It's a little late, but I've already reported to Uncle everything that happened at the Zamparini mansion. That night, we've witnessed each other's naked forms, had intimate skin contact, slept in the same bed, and our lips have already pressed together in a frenzy uncountably."

"W-Why do you have to use such an easily misunderstood description!?"

"Misunderstood? On the contrary, it is to express our relationship properly. As a result, Uncle sighed deeply and said

things like 'I never expected to feel like a bride's father so soon...' He even grumbled quite a bit."

Godou suddenly noticed Erica had increased the force she was using to hold his arm.

He wanted to pull out but could not move at all. Did she use magic or something to raise her arm strength?

Looking at Erica's face, he could see her smile admitting to his suspicions.

"It's really wonderful that you proposed going to Milan, Godou. The first thing you'll do is meet Uncle, and it'd be best if you expressed official congratulations for my assumption of the [Diavolo Rosso] title."

"If it's for that kind of stuff, no way. I'm returning to Japan!"

"What are you talking about? You haven't even obtained your plane ticket yet."

"I'll stand by for cancellations. In the worst case I'll ask Zamparini-san for help!"

"Don't say something so heartless. Actually, there's this great river coursing through the wide open plains of Tuscany, but lately a giant eel monster has been sighted. As soon as it approaches Milan, we can try capturing it."

"You can go on your own for something like that, right!?"

"This monster appears to be a creature of divine beast class. Maybe it's not an eel but a serpentine divine beast. In that case, it's an opponent that no one can defeat but a Campione like Godou."

"I don't want to fight anymore! I've had enough of this!"

"What are you talking about? You were clearly fighting with such intensity of vigor. Besides, there shouldn't be any divine beasts that could take on a Campione. In terms of risk, the only issue is the fact that Tuscany falls under Sir Salvatore's territory, so he'll be sure to join in the fun."

"No matter how you look at it, that's the most dangerous risk factor!"

Kusanagi Godou and Erica Blandelli.

The seventh Campione and the premier knight of the [Copper Black Cross].

Thus concluded the story of their beginnings, to be followed by the start of endless adventures.

Afterword

Back when I first began the series, I decisively made the following resolution:

"I will never write a story such as *Campione!*'s beginning or the like."

Ultimately, this is the story about an ordinary human who defeated a god. If he did not endure a journey of hardship akin to clearing levels in an epic RPG, there would be no value.

Hence, *Campione!*'s origin story should be a long arc spanning three to five volumes. But writing all that out in detail would delay the beginning of the main story, so I took the omission route instead. As long as I'm happy (this is super important).

As a result, when asked to write the origin story, I said this:

"If the series gets a manga or anime adaptation (even though I don't really think it would), then just put the adaptation-original beginning story there. Then novelize it afterwards."

My proposal was immediately rejected. This was how Volume 3 came to be suddenly published. However, simply describing the birth of the Devil King from the start already used up an entire volume, so after that I optimistically thought "we'll have a chance to tell the rest of the story sooner or later, fufufufufu" and "oh well, there will be another chance next time!" But life is full of surprises.

The series has expanded beyond my expectations, so the time has come to tell that story in the past.

From the author's point of view, I was writing the incredible developments of Volume 11 with the feeling of "what would it be like if I wrote things this way?" It would be great if everyone enjoyed it.

In terms of surprises, the sudden good news announced this time is also quite unexpected. This is the result of everyone else's hard work for bringing plans to fruition.

I'll take this opportunity to thank everyone again.

As the author I would like to express to everyone involved with the anime production:

"Sorry for the original work being so troublesome."

Hence I express my sincere apologies.

Well then, the next volume will once again return to the main story .

In the story, it is now December when winter truly arrives. Winter festivities will be the main theme. Eh? Christmas? Cough, is this a Christian conspiracy? As a believer of Shin Buddhism[23], I don't really get it.

Everyone, if possible, let us meet again in the next volume.

...By the way, I also wrote a new script for the Drama CD included with the issue of "SUPER DASH & GO!" to be sold in February.

If you wish, please show your support there as well.

Takedzuki Jou, November 2011

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ **Golfo degli Angeli**: the Gulf of Angels, large bay in southern Sardinia, facing the Tyrrhenian Sea.[1]
2. ↑ **Geomancy**(地): literally "earth divination," a method of divination that involves interpreting markings on the ground or patterns formed from tossed handfuls of soil, rocks, or sand.[2]
3. ↑ **Physiognomy**(観): an assessment based on the outer appearance of a person, object, or terrain.[3]
4. ↑ **Fuoriclasse**: Italian for unrivaled or unequaled.[4]
5. ↑ **Wide show**: a type of current affairs and entertainment program on television.
6. ↑ A reference to the Latin phrase "Memento mori," meaning remember your mortality. An artistic theme dating back to antiquity.[5]
7. ↑ **Senatus consultum ultimum**: Latin for "Final decree of the Senate," a decree of the Roman Senate during the late Republic passed in times of emergency.[6]
8. ↑ **Gelato**: Italian ice cream made using milk, cream, sugars and flavorings such as fresh fruit or nut purees.[7]
9. ↑ **Sanzu River**(三): the River of Three Crossings, believed in Japanese Buddhism that the dead must cross on their way to the afterlife, similar to the River Styx in Greek mythology.[8]
10. ↑ **Yam**: a god of the sea popular in ancient Egyptian times.[9]
11. ↑ **Kothar-wa-Khasis**: a Canaanite craftsman god who aided Baal in his battles. Considered the equivalent of the Greek god Hephaestus.[10]
12. ↑ **Special effects presentation**(特): Tokusatsu is a Japanese term referring to live-action film or television programmes

which feature superheroes and often giant monsters. *Godzilla* is one such example.[11]

13. ↑ **Word of Abandonment**: quoted by Jesus from Psalm 22, it is the only saying that appears in more than one gospel (Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34).
14. ↑ Psalm 22:2
15. ↑ Psalm 22:22
16. ↑ **Senatus consultum ultimum**: Latin for "Final decree of the Senate," a decree of the Roman Senate during the late Republic passed in times of emergency.[12]
17. ↑ **Dogeza**(土): literally "sitting right on the ground," an element of Japanese manners by kneeling directly on the ground and bowing to prostrate oneself as touching one's head to the floor.[13]
18. ↑ **Locked room mystery**: a sub-genre of detective fiction where a crime is committed under seemingly impossible conditions.[14]
19. ↑ **Tuatha Dé Danann**: Irish clan of deities. Later they moved underground and became fairy-like beings.[15]
20. ↑ **Cool Biz**: a movement in Japan to lower electricity consumption by limiting the use of air-conditioning. Consequently, workers were encouraged to dress down and wear short-sleeved shirts without jackets or ties.[16]
21. ↑ **Tardigrade**: a small, water-dwelling, segmented animal with eight legs. Tardigrades are able to survive in extreme environments that would kill almost any other animal, such as temperatures of close to absolute zero, temperatures as high as 151°C, 1000 times more radiation than other animals,

and almost a decade without water. Tardigrades have also returned alive from studies in which they have been exposed to the vacuum of space for a few days in low Earth orbit.[17]

22. ↑ Psalm 18:6-7
23. ↑ **Shin Buddhism**(淨): literally True School of Pure Land Buddhism, the most widely practiced branch of Buddhism in Japan, with 20% of the population of Japan identifying membership of the sect.[18]